



Communications and Marketing

Building a Communications and Marketing Plan for
Individual Incremental Credentials

Published April 2023

www.credentialasyougo.org



www.credentialasyougo.org

info@credentialasyougo.org

About Credential As You Go

Credential As You Go is catalyzing redesign and integration of credentialing systems across states, higher education, and third-party providers, including employers, to recognize all learners for what they know and can do.

Credential As You Go focuses on building an incremental credentialing system, recognizing that many types of quality credentials (degrees, certificates, industry certifications, licenses, badges, microcredentials) document an individual's learning, and credentials are awarded by many types of providers including community and technical colleges, four-year colleges and universities, third-party organizations, employers, military, and state licensing boards.

For too many learners, the only postsecondary credentials that count for employment are degrees. This focus limits access to further education and employment. Yet, many have acquired valuable skills and knowledge through life and work experience. The U.S. needs a credentialing system that captures and validates all learning.

© Copyright Credential As You Go, 2023. May be used for educational purposes without written permission but with a citation to this source.

This publication is protected by copyright, and permission must be obtained from Credential As You Go prior to any prohibited reproduction, storage in a retrieval system, or transmission in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or likewise.

Suggested Citation:

Credential As You Go (May, 2023). Building a Communications and Marketing Plan for Individual Incremental Credentials. <https://credentialasyougo.org/playbooks/building-a-marketing-strategy-for-specific-incremental-credentials-or-programs>

Table of Contents

- 2 About Credential As You Go
- 4 Overview
- 7 Six-Step Approach
- 14 Resource: Website Examples
- 22 Resource: Understanding The Community College Marketing Context – A Lumina Foundation Initiative
- 24 Conclusion
- 25 Resources for Further Information
- 27 Acknowledgements

Overview

Introduction

Communications and marketing are critical in the effort to transform the nation's degree-centric postsecondary model to an incremental credentialing system.

To support such a major transformation, communications and marketing are needed at three levels:

- 1 State and Institution Wide
- 2 Individual credential and program levels
- 3 Nationwide

This Playbook focuses on the second of these.

Purpose

This Playbook is designed to help you build a communications and marketing strategy for specific incremental credentials and/or programs – including those that focus on industry certifications and/or those offered by entities other than colleges and universities. The Playbook will help in crafting a strategy that:

- Is informed by definitions commonly used in the communications and marketing field
- Guides ways to effectively reach multiple audiences, including learners, faculty and staff, media, and employers
- Achieves program or institutional goals for awareness and promotion of incremental credentials and/or programs

Definitions of Key Terms

Channel – A channel is any of the many avenues or vehicles that can be used to deliver communication and marketing messages. [Communication channels](#) are the means through which people and organizations interact. There are many different types of communication channels, each with its own strengths and weaknesses. The best way to select the right communication channel is to consider the purpose of the communication, the preferences of the audience, and the time frame in which the message needs to be delivered.

Communications and Marketing Plan – A communications and marketing plan is one that is both strategic and tactical, created to support an organization’s or initiative’s overall strategic plan. Businesses use [marketing plans](#) as a strategic roadmap to organize, execute, and track their marketing strategy over a given period.

Strategic Communication – [Strategic communication](#) is an umbrella term to describe the activities of disciplines including public relations, management communication, and advertising. The approach focuses on strategy rather than specific tactics. Strategic communications refers to an organization’s planned and purposeful use of communications principles, strategies, and initiatives to further its goals, mission, and/or values. Focus on conveying a specific message that is not necessarily related to advertising. In incremental credentialing, the message may be to make the case for an incremental credentialing system—to raise awareness of new approaches and build commitment to transforming the degree-centric credentialing system to an incremental credentialing system.

Strategic Planning – [Strategic planning](#) focuses on the 3C’s in a marketing strategy: Customer, Corporation, and Competitors. A detailed analysis of each factor is key to the success of strategy formulation. The 3 C’s refer to the following three [questions](#):

- *Customers* – Who are our target customers? What do they want or need? How can we reach them?
- *Company (entity)* – Who are we? What do we do? What can we do? How do we want to be perceived?
- *Competition* – Who are our competitors? What are they doing? How can we differentiate ourselves?

Marketing Strategy – [Marketing strategy](#) is an organization’s promotional efforts to allocate its resources across a wide range of platforms, channels to increase its sales and achieve sustainable competitive advantage within its corresponding market. A marketing strategy [describes](#) how a business will accomplish a particular goal or mission (e.g., including campaigns, content, channels, and marketing software they’ll use to execute that mission and track its success). A thorough marketing strategy covers the [four Ps of marketing](#): product, price, place, and promotion. Marketing’s main goal is to educate and advertise a product, service, idea, or organization. In our case, the product is availability of specific incremental credential programs—for learners and employers—in your state and/or institution.



Six-Step Approach

Overview

The following six-step approach can help you develop an effective communications and marketing plan:

- 1 Define Initiatives and Goals
- 2 Define Your Audience/Target Market
- 3 Analyze Landscape/Marketplace
- 4 Prioritize and Select Marketing Channels
- 5 Define Incremental Credentialing Messaging
- 6 Review Costs and Budget

Each step is described in the next six sections.

Step 1: Define Initiatives and Goals

An institution can use the following template to define various initiatives and establish messaging and marketing goals for incremental credentials—both individual credentials and credential pathway programs. An institution that is developing a broad strategy for incremental credentialing may have several initiatives in mind. One that is focusing its communications strategy on a single incremental credential will likely have fewer initiatives to message and market. Each initiative should include: a description of the initiative's focus, a clearly defined goal (s), and at least one metric to measure success.

Example:

Initiative X will use blogs and other written social media content to market incremental credential(s) to our students (current, prospective, former) and their family members.

Description

Example: Over the next 12 months, we'll build a blog property that becomes a go-to resource for our students'/parents' burning questions—and our main source of leads each month.

Define goal(s) for the initiative

Example: To increase our website's rank on Google and create critical top-of-the-funnel marketing content that helps our academic team start more conversations with prospective students and parents.

Identify metrics to measure success

Example: 50,000 organic page views per month / 10 content downloads per month.

Step 2: Define Your Audience/Target Market

Because incremental credentialing is a new approach to education and training, it is imperative to communicate these changes to a broad array of stakeholders. These stakeholders include learners, employers, college and university faculty and advisors, policymakers, quality assurance entities, and others. All of these audiences will want to know whether incremental credentials are credible, of high quality, and can help those who acquire them reach their education and career goals. In many cases, they also want to know how these credentials already fit within traditional education and training systems. Communications and marketing efforts can help convey these messages to defined audiences. The first step, therefore, is to define your audience.

An institution's or organization's audience for specific incremental credentials or programs often includes:

- Learners—prospective, enrolled, and formerly enrolled
- School districts that are large feeders to your institution
- Employers that employ your learners and graduates and work with you on reskilling programs
- Faculty and student support services staff
- Continuing education and outreach units
- Quality assurance entities, including your institutional accreditor and specialized accreditors for your various programs

To define these audiences, go “granular” by documenting a range of descriptors for them. For instance, list your audience's job roles, top priorities, motivation, needs, objectives, media consumption practices, research methods, trusted resources, and budget and purchasing processes. When considering individuals within audiences, it may be useful to document their likes and dislikes, habits and skills, education levels, and demographic information.

The more clearly and specifically you define your audiences, the better able you'll be to create communications and marketing efforts that speak effectively to them. In the template described in Step 1, include an initiative that focuses on outreach to specific audiences.

Step 3: Analyze the Landscape/Marketplace

Other institutions and organizations are already developing and offering incremental credentials. You may not need to reinvent the wheel. Learn about their communications and marketing approaches as you design or improve your own. Ask these questions to guide your research:

- What types of communications and marketing are being used by other institutions and organizations?
- Who is taking on the major role of communications and marketing? Is it IT (for institution or program websites)? Instructional design staff? Communications staff? Continuing education units? Is the task outsourced to a public relations or marketing firm?
- How do various organizations differ in their communications and marketing approaches?
- What strategies and tactics have proven successful in getting the word out?
- Do communications and marketing efforts differ among credential providers (e.g., community colleges, universities, third-party providers)? And among levels (non-credit, undergraduate, graduate level)?
- What are the biggest challenges you likely will face in getting the word out, and how can you prepare to meet them?

Include an initiative on your template to indicate how you expect to compete in the target marketplace.

Example:

Initiative X expects to compete with other providers of incremental credentials through the following efforts:

Products we compete with:

We have identified this institution's course, what it does, and what it might do better than others such as: X, Y, Z.

Other ways we compete:

This competitor has a blog that ranks highly on Google for many of the same keywords we would like to write content on.

Step 4: Prioritize and Select Marketing Channels

Getting the word out effectively about your incremental credentials will require both marketing and communications. A strong digital presence matters in higher education—a fact underscored by a survey shared by [Noetic Consultants](#), a marketing and leadership consulting firm.

The survey from [Carnegie Dartlet/CollegeXpress](#), “[Student Insights Report 2022](#)” showed that among higher education prospects (future students), [95% said website design influences their college choice](#). Also, 82% use search engines to learn about a degree or program without having a school already in mind, [73% use social media](#) to research college options, and [49% enjoy web content](#) that is personalized to their interests and behaviors.

Here are key “channels” (delivery methods) commonly used to communicate about incremental credentials:

- Websites
- Digital platforms
- Employers’ presentations, newsletters
- Social media
- State-level data systems that include incremental credentials
- Institution-wide approaches to verifying incremental credentials on college transcripts
- Podcasts
- Posters/fliers featuring messages and new programs

Some providers use a number of these channels, others only one or two. The most popular avenues for getting the word out are websites and college catalogs.

Providers may have multiple websites to use, including an all-campus website and/ or the program website. They also use their college catalogs, and in some cases separate catalogs exist for credit courses and programs and those that are non-credit. Providers often include wage information plus return on investment (ROI) data for various credentials. They describe pathways and courses, including information about prerequisites and costs. Websites often feature stories of successful students in credential programs, and they may include messages from employers indicating they value certain credentials.

Employers can also help get the word out, especially large employers. Their newsletters, intranet emails, and employee websites might describe credential programs, provide information about the employer's tuition assistance programs, and share news of partnerships with colleges, and the availability of apprenticeships and other learn-and-work options that include short-term credentials. Company leaders can build credibility for incremental credentials via audio or video messages on program and college websites.

Academic and career advising offices and Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) units provide information directly to learners and assess skills and learning acquired outside the classroom.

Some providers submit their credentials to their system-level database/website if they are in a system that consolidates credentials. They also may submit their credentials to national platforms and/or intermediary websites.

Providers often communicate about new credentials and credential pathways through printed material—posters and fliers that are distributed through direct mail or posted on campus and at employer and community sites.

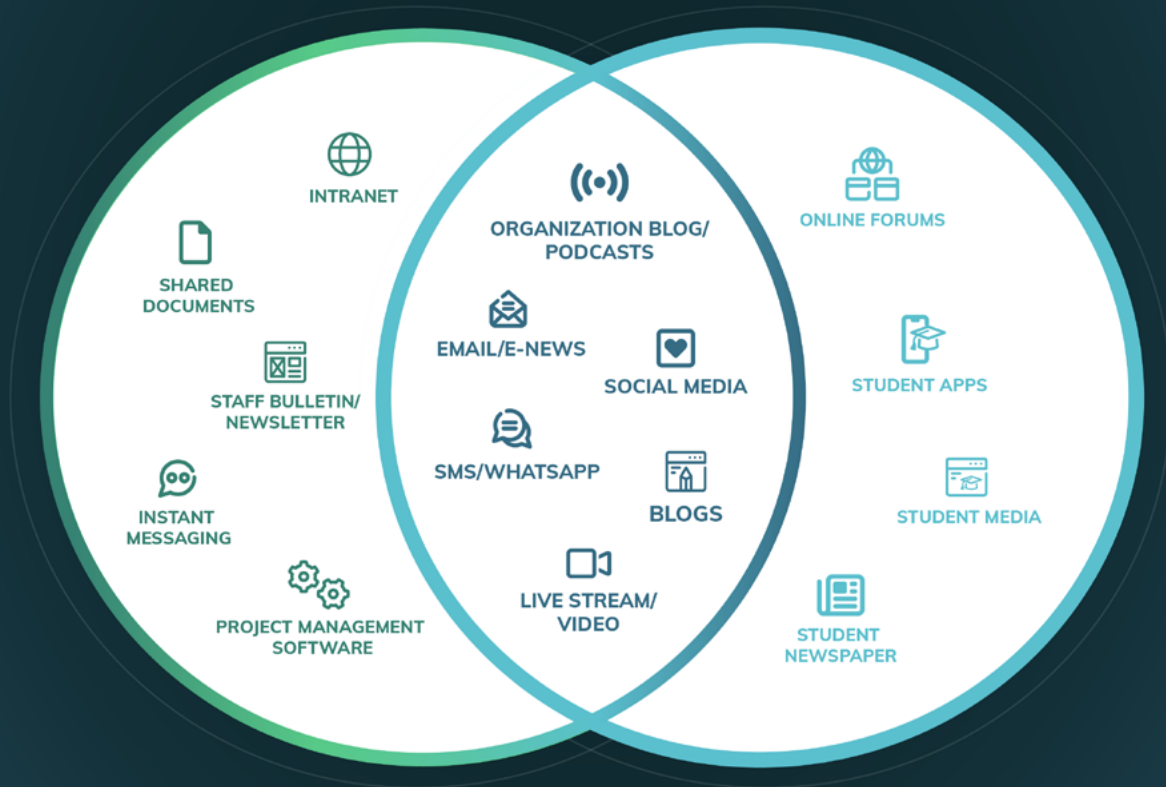
Social media platforms—including Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, and Instagram—are some social examples to get the word out.

Verifying and recording credentials sends an important message about their value to learners and employers. Providers can record credentials in the college transcript, and then work with students to include them in resumé and student-owned e-portfolios.

COMMUNICATION CHANNELS

● ORGANIZATION/UNIVERSITY
COMMUNICATION (INTERNAL)

● STUDENT COMMUNICATION
(EXTERNAL)



A VENN DIAGRAM SHOWING DIFFERENT CHANNELS OF COMMUNICATION WHICH ARE DISPLAYED WITH WORDS AND ICONS

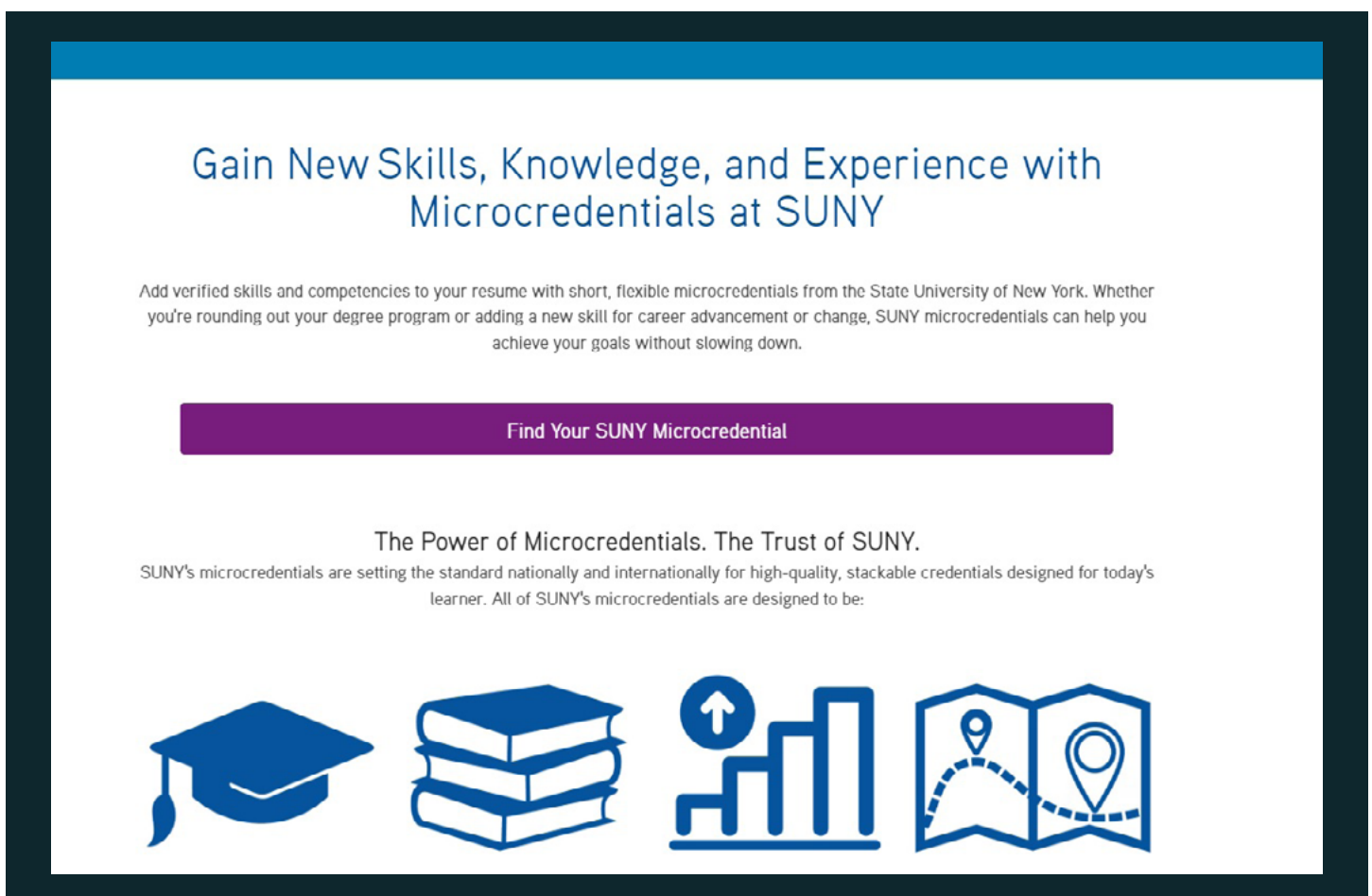
Add an initiative to your communications and marketing master template that clearly defines the channel(s) you will use, identifies the credential(s) you are marketing, and for what period of time (e.g., over a year's period).

Resource: Website Examples

This section offers several examples of online approaches that colleges, universities, and other organizations are using to communicate and market their incremental credentials and programs like micro-pathways, for example.

Example 1

A state-level consolidated database of credentials to enable marketing and communications about credentials at multiple institutions from the SUNY system. This image shows the [SUNY Microcredentials page](#). When users click the purple bar—the “Find your SUNY Microcredential” link on the homepage—the search feature shown in the second image comes up.



The screenshot shows a website page with a blue header. The main heading is "Gain New Skills, Knowledge, and Experience with Microcredentials at SUNY". Below this is a paragraph of text: "Add verified skills and competencies to your resume with short, flexible microcredentials from the State University of New York. Whether you're rounding out your degree program or adding a new skill for career advancement or change, SUNY microcredentials can help you achieve your goals without slowing down." A prominent purple button with the text "Find Your SUNY Microcredential" is centered below the text. Further down, there is another heading: "The Power of Microcredentials. The Trust of SUNY." followed by a paragraph: "SUNY's microcredentials are setting the standard nationally and internationally for high-quality, stackable credentials designed for today's learner. All of SUNY's microcredentials are designed to be:". At the bottom, there are four blue icons: a graduation cap, a stack of books, a bar chart with an upward arrow, and an open map with location pins.

Example 2

Wake Tech Community College in North Carolina—which offers the [Wake Technical Powerpack](#)—shows how credentials are linked to workforce titles. As students search through the available powerpack options, they can see the details of each, including the intended audience, description, price, course outlines, and requirements. This page on the site also offers a link to register.



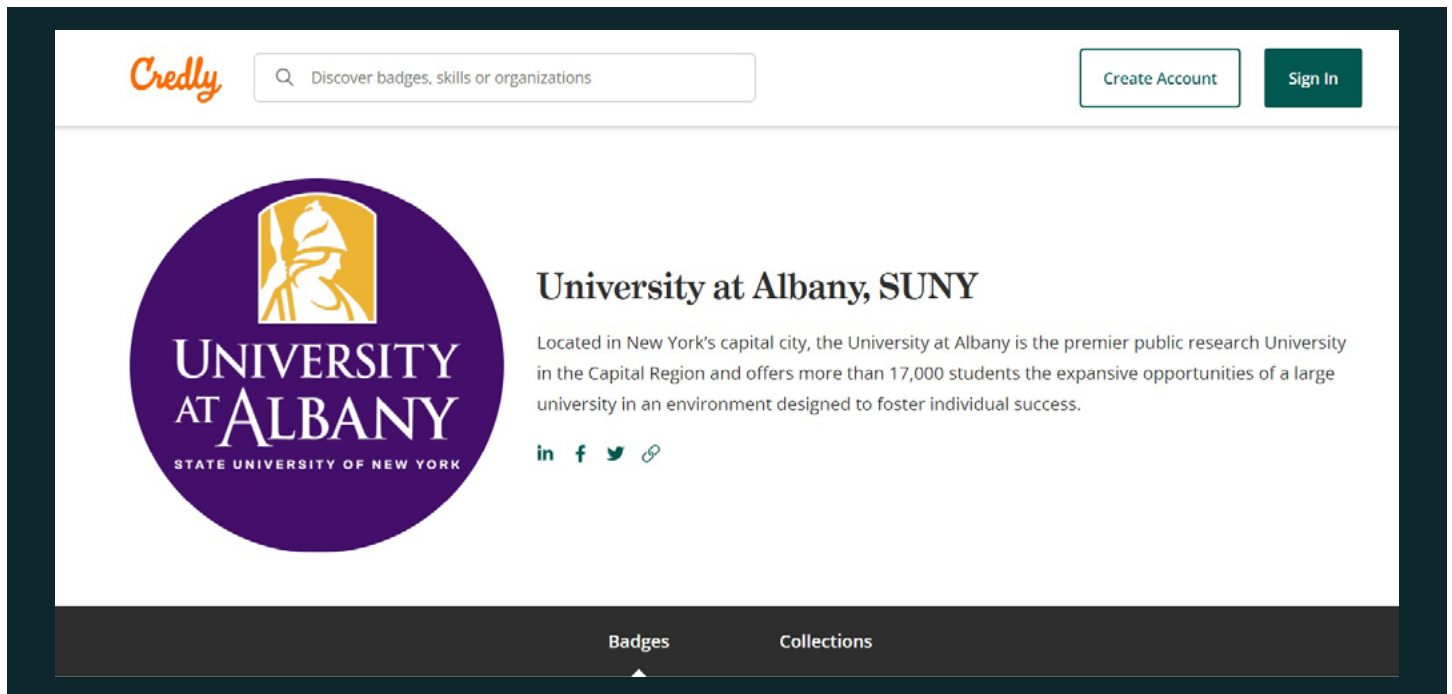
Example 3

SUNY Mohawk Valley Community College markets a path of stackable/[microcredentials](#) in the area of remotely piloted aircraft systems, fabrication welding, ornamental welding, structural welding, carpentry fundamentals, and masonry fundamentals. Students and employers can see the flexible entrance and exit points for three microcredentials that lead students directly into jobs as drone maintenance technicians, drone pilots, or GIS technicians. The pathway also enables students to move through these microcredentials with additional coursework and a capstone to earn an associate degree.



Example 4

The University at Albany-SUNY, in cooperation with Credly, markets a [global open badge platform](#). A badge issued through the Credly platform is a digital representation of a learning outcome, experience, or competency.



The screenshot displays the Credly website interface. At the top left is the Credly logo. To its right is a search bar with the placeholder text "Discover badges, skills or organizations". Further right are two buttons: "Create Account" and "Sign In". The main content area features the University at Albany, SUNY logo on the left, which is a purple circle containing a gold figure and the text "UNIVERSITY AT ALBANY STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK". To the right of the logo is the text "University at Albany, SUNY" followed by a paragraph: "Located in New York's capital city, the University at Albany is the premier public research University in the Capital Region and offers more than 17,000 students the expansive opportunities of a large university in an environment designed to foster individual success." Below this text are social media icons for LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, and a link icon. At the bottom of the page, there are two tabs: "Badges" and "Collections".

Example 5

The University of Colorado-Boulder website shares information about new [micro-credential and digital badge programs](#).

The screenshot shows the top navigation bar of the University of Colorado Boulder website. It includes the university logo and name, the Office of the Registrar, and links for Students and Faculty & Staff. Below the navigation is a large banner image of a mountain landscape with trees. The main heading is "Micro-Credential Administration".

About Micro-Credentials & Digital Badges

While traditional degrees and certificate programs recognize more robust programs of academic study, micro-credentials provide a way to recognize and document the acquisition of specific skills or competencies.

Upon successful completion of a micro-credential program, learners are issued a digital badge that allows achievements to be displayed and shared. Just as diplomas serve to recognize degrees, digital badges are artifacts that offer recognition and storytelling about micro-credentials.

Because they're digital, badges contain metadata about the program's requirements and learning objectives, as well as links to educational artifacts. This makes them independently verifiable and portable, empowering learners to use, share and display their credentials however

Micro-credentials may...

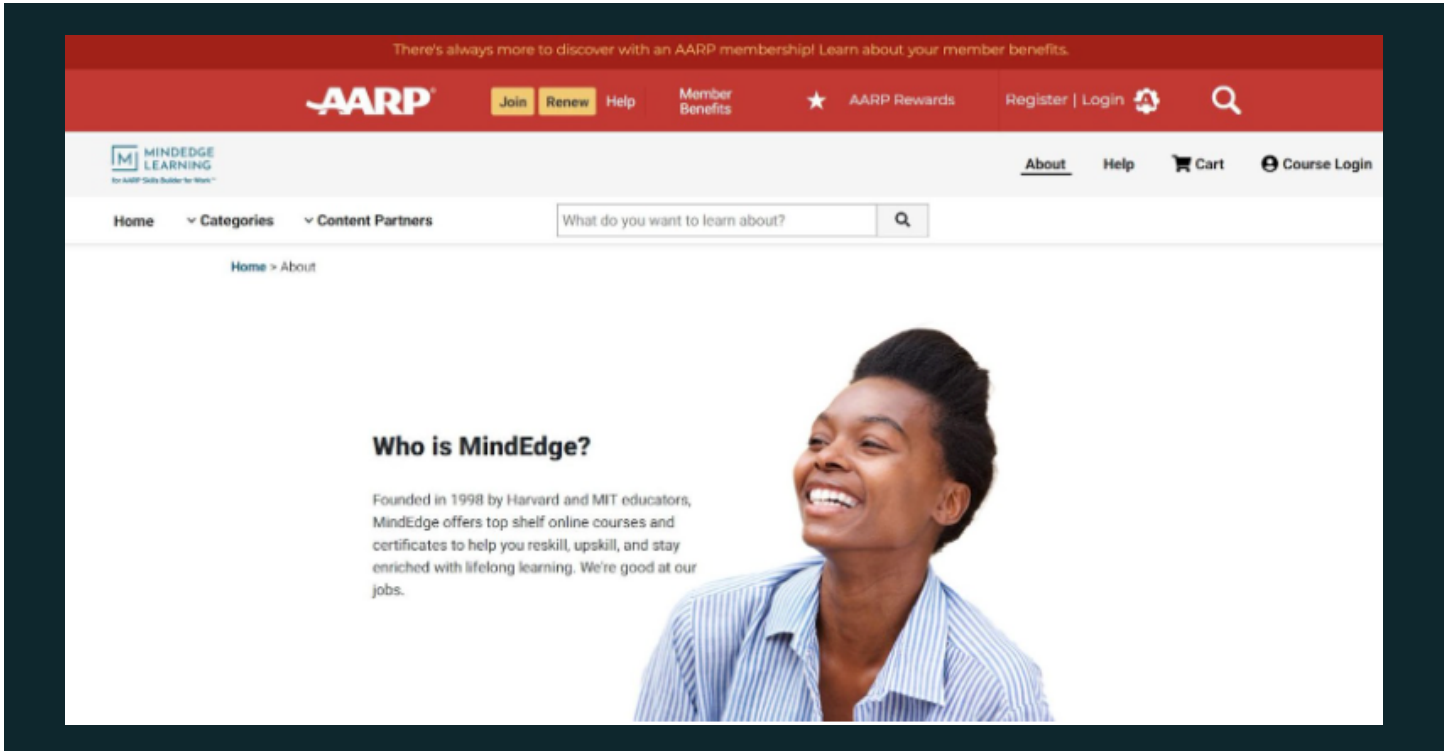
- Complement traditional degrees or certificate programs
- Be offered as stand-alone credentials for students, faculty, staff, community members or corporations
- Be for-credit or noncredit
- Be offered on flexible timeframes
- Be highly focused

About

- Announcements
- Class Enrollment
- Class & Facility Scheduling
- Curriculum & Catalog
- Faculty & Staff Calendar
- Grade Processing
- Program Enrollment
- BAM & Concurrent Degrees

Example 6

A third-party provider, AARP, is working with MindEdge Learning to offer courses that can boost the careers of the 50+ population. Learners can earn certificates from MindEdge to let prospective employers know they are bringing marketable skills.



Example 7

The University of Maryland Global Campus is marketing ways to turn an industry certification into college credit. This example shows how advising and prior learning assessment can help boost incremental credentialing.

The screenshot shows the top navigation bar of the University of Maryland Global Campus website. The navigation includes links for LOCATIONS, GET HELP, 855-655-8682, CURRENT STUDENTS, LOGIN, REQUEST INFO, and APPLY NOW. Below the navigation bar is a search bar and a list of menu items: Academic Programs, Tuition & Finances, Admission, Transfers & Credits, About UMGC, Military, and UMGC Blog. The main content area features a large yellow banner with the text "CREDIT FOR INDUSTRY CERTIFICATION & PROFESSIONAL COURSES". Below the banner is a breadcrumb trail: UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND GLOBAL CAMPUS / TRANSFERS & CREDITS / FAST PATHS TO CREDIT / CREDIT FOR INDUSTRY CERTIFICATION & PROFESSIONAL COURSES. On the left side, there is a dark blue button labeled "EXPLORE MORE OF UMGC" and three links: "Transfers & Credits", "Fast Paths to Credit", and "Credit by Exam". The main text on the page reads: "Turn your industry credentials into college credit. University of Maryland Global Campus accepts many industry-standard certifications and professional courses for college credit. To be considered for credit, please send a record of your industry certification(s) to studentrecords@umgc.edu after you apply to UMGC. Computer certifications must have been earned within the past five years to be considered."

Example 8

Unmudl, an intermediary that offers a platform of non-credit and credit short courses, markets some offerings from participating community colleges.

The screenshot shows the Unmudl website homepage. At the top, there is a purple navigation bar with the text "TO RECRUIT OR UPSKILL" and social media icons for Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram, and YouTube. Below this is a white header with the Unmudl logo (tagline: "Skills to Jobs Marketplace") and navigation links for "Employers", "Jobs & Subjects", "Colleges", "About", and "Unmudl Originals". On the right side of the header, there are "Log in" and "Create Account" buttons.

The main content area features a large circular image of a smiling woman with dark curly hair. To the left of the image, the text reads: "Get Skills. Get Creds. Get Hired.™". Below this, a search bar contains the text "Search for Courses, Skills or Jobs" and a "Search" button. Underneath the search bar are "Quick Links" for "Courses Under \$100.00", "Amazon Courses", "Financial Assistance", and "Courses Eligible for Credit".

Overlaid on the image are several callouts: a purple speech bubble asking "Did you know employers can pay your tuition?", a "Go to Reviews" button with a five-star rating, and a "DISRUPTOR AWARD" badge with a gold coin icon.

Resource: Understanding The Community College Marketing Context – A Lumina Foundation Initiative

[“Understanding the Community College Marketing Context: Insights from The Million Dollar Community College Challenge”](#) (Lumina Foundation, 2022), examined a variety of issues relevant to the marketing of credential programs. The Lumina report notes that community colleges already employ many strategies to market themselves to potential students and the communities they serve. Branding was a key strategy for more than half of the applicants to the Lumina challenge proposal, although many described it as a recent investment or a plan for the future.

Marketing focused on traditional activities such as direct mail, email, website, TV and radio (both direct and streaming), and bus wrapping. Direct outreach included print materials, media/name recognition, tours, and campus events. A few themes emerged among institutions, including: digital marketing and videography; direct outreach to students through apps, chatbots, and individual contact; investments in campus or extensions through signage, hubs, and mobile services; and increased perception and word-of-mouth.

As a whole, the applicant institutions displayed significant capacity and experience in running specific campaigns to promote the college or specific programs. The institutions also understand that community connections are critical in recruiting adult students. Many cited the importance of embedding navigators in workforce centers or other community groups, creating connections and partnerships with employers, and recruiting students at community events.

It was also clear that marketing is no longer just about enrolling students. Most applicants highlighted their role of supporting students from the time they enter the institution until they complete their programs. Marketing teams are critical partners as institutions seek to transform themselves in ways that better serve adult students. They’re also vital to the success of initiatives related to advising and navigation, guided pathways, meeting students’ basic needs, competency-based education, connecting credit and non-credit courses, and improving partnerships with industry.

Institutions appeared to have a clear understanding of who their prospective adult students were and how to appeal to them. The prevalent messages community colleges used showed a comprehensive understanding of the many dynamics at play for adult learners. Messaging has four key components: who you are, what we offer, how we relate to you, and what it means for you.

One of the important recommendations for the Million Dollar Challenge is that colleges must transform to meet student needs. As the report notes on Page 14: “marketing and branding can’t focus solely on reaching learners. Promises to adult students must be followed by systems, structures, and supports that ensure adult students succeed at scale.”

Conclusion

Marketing and communication efforts around incremental credentialing are important. Your role within the movement is important as well, and will determine the success of this work. We hope that the steps described here will give your marketing and communications teams a head start.

Additional marketing and communications resources will be added to this Playbook as they are discovered. To share your specific examples, please email: info@credentialasyougo.org or submit examples [here](#).

Resources for Further Information

To view all the following resources on a single page online, use the QR code or please visit: <https://credentialasyougo.org/playbooks/building-a-marketing-strategy-for-specific-incremental-credentials-or-programs/resources-for-further-information/>



AARP with MindEdge Learning: <https://jobskills.aarp.org/catalogue/about>

American Marketing Association. (2023). The Four Ps of Marketing: <https://www.ama.org/marketing-news/the-four-ps-of-marketing/>

Bhasin, H. (2022). Communication Channels – Definition, Types and Role: <https://www.marketing91.com/communication-channels/>

Carnegie CollegeXpress Student Insights Report: <https://www.carnegiehighered.com/events/collegexpress-student-insights-report/>

Carnegie | Higher Education Digital Marketing Trends for 2022 and Beyond: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0nkatTqD2CY>

Google Education Insights Team – Google internal data from “Student Success Survey” Q1 2022 as presented by Claudia Howard, Head of Industry (Acquired from Lumina Foundation, 2023)

Marketing plan: <https://blog.hubspot.com/marketing/marketing-plan-examples>

Marketing strategy: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marketing_strategy

Marketing strategy: <https://blog.hubspot.com/marketing/marketing-plan-examples>

Marketing strategy: <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/m/marketing-strategy.asp#Marketing%20Strategies%20vs.%20Marketing%20Plans>

State Level Consolidated Database (State University of New York): <https://www.suny.edu/microcredentials/>

Strategic communication: <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/display/document/obo-9780199756841/obo-9780199756841-0007.xml>

Strategic planning: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marketing_strategy

SUNY Mohawk Valley Community College: <https://www.mvcc.edu/microcredentials/>

TargetX Digital Admissions Report, “Step Up Your Enrollment Marketing Campaigns and Strategies”: <https://www.targetx.com/higher-ed-insights/research/digital-admissions/>

The 3 Cs of Marketing – Company, Customers and Competition: www.marketing91.com/3-c-concept-marketing-strategy/

University at Albany-SUNY, in cooperation with Credly: <https://www.credly.com/organizations/university-at-albany-suny/badges>

University of Colorado-Boulder: <https://www.colorado.edu/registrar/faculty-staff/programs/micro-credentials>

University of Maryland Global Campus: <https://www.umgc.edu/transfers-and-credits/fast-paths-to-credit/industry-certification-professional-courses>

Unmudl: <https://unmudl.com/>

Wake Tech Community College (NC): <https://www.waketech.edu/programs-courses/non-credit/enhance-your-career/information-technology/it-certifications>

Watts, J. (2021). Communication Channels: Their Importance and The Impact of Covid-19. Expert Market: <https://www.expertmarket.com/phone-systems/communication-channels-importance-impact-covid-19>

Additional Resources

[LEARN & WORK ECOSYSTEM LIBRARY CREDENTIAL AS YOU GO DICTIONARY](#)

Acknowledgements

Credential As You Go created this playbook with the help of the following authors and editors. We sincerely appreciate the effort.

- Lead Author Holly Zanville, George Washington University & Credential As You Go
- Lead Author Lucia Weathers, Weathers Strategy Group & Credential As You Go

The Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education funds Credential As You Go (Grant R305T210063), which focuses on rapid prototyping of and research on incremental credentials with a national campaign. A Walmart Grant supports systems change for expansion and sustainability of incremental credentials. The opinions expressed in this Playbook are those of the author(s) and do not represent views of our funders.

Additional Resources

Please check our website for updated content, strategies, and examples:
www.credentialasyougo.org