Non-Traditional Program Playbook

The Pervasive Surge of
Non-Credit and
Alternative Credentials
in Higher Education

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The Pervasive Surge of Non-Credit and Alternative Credentials in Higher Education

Higher education's landscape is shifting. Non-degree programs like dual enrollment, alternative credentials, and certifications are thriving, with exclusive growth over the past four years (NSC Research Center). 62% of colleges already offer or plan to offer non-credit courses, with 66% considering alternative credentials a strategic priority (UPCEA). The pandemic accelerated this shift, with 56% of continuing education leaders reporting expansion. Employers are following suit, with 88% of corporations and six states adopting skills-based hiring - prioritizing skills over degrees (Jenzabar). 71% of HR executives are seeing more applicants featuring non-degree credentials on their resumes (UPCEA). This surge demands strategic adaptation from institutions to stay relevant.

About the Study

As higher education institutions increasingly pivot towards the recognition of alternative credentials, the imperative lies in adopting a data-driven methodology. A valuable repository of best practices can be gleaned from the wealth of experience provided by mature online program management and Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) platforms. Despite occasional scrutiny of their efficacy and completion rates, it is undeniable that these platforms have experienced extraordinary growth over the last five years.

In the context of this research, we curated insights from five prominent online learning platforms, namely LinkedIn Learning, Coursera, edX, Udemy, and DataCamp. Our analysis delved into the 500 most-enrolled courses across these platforms, aiming to extract valuable intelligence on program areas, pricing dynamics, marketing strategies, and course design nuances.

By leveraging the comprehensive insights garnered from these online platforms, universities can proactively shape their approaches to program development, pricing structures, promotional endeavors, and instructional design. The careful consideration of these data-driven best practices is instrumental in navigating the evolving landscape of alternative credentials and ensuring their effective integration within the higher education framework.

Non-degree Programs

(dual enrollment, alternative credentials, certifications) have been the only higher education segments to see consistent growth in the past 4 years.

88%

of corporations and 6 states are adopting hiring initiatives that focus on skills rather than college degrees.

56%

of continuing, workforce and online education leaders report that CE has expanded since the pandemic.

66%

Of schools strongly agree that alternative credentials are a key component of the strategic plan of the institution

62%

of surveyed colleges offer or plan to offer non-credit courses.

71%

of HR execs have experienced an increase in job applicants listing non-degree credentials on their resumes.

The Largest OPM/MOOC Platforms

Within the realm of micro-credentials, an exploration of the top 500 courses based on enrollment reveals that Coursera, EdX, and Udemy emerge as the top three platforms, with Coursera standing out as the clear leader. It is noteworthy to acknowledge LinkedIn Learning as one of the largest platforms; however, LinkedIn Learning does not publish "enrollments" but rather "views" of its courses, so we could not include that data. That said, many courses in the LinkedIn library have "views" that match or exceed the number of enrollments in other platforms.

Coursera's prominence in the top tier of enrolled courses suggests a robust user engagement and a significant market presence. The nuanced distinctions between these platforms highlight the diverse strategies employed in the dissemination of micro-credentials. While Coursera dominates in terms of enrollment, EdX and Udemy contribute to the varied landscape, each with its unique strengths and focus areas.

Top Platforms

Legend: ■ Coursera ■ EDX ■ Udemy ■ Datacamp ■ Futurelearn
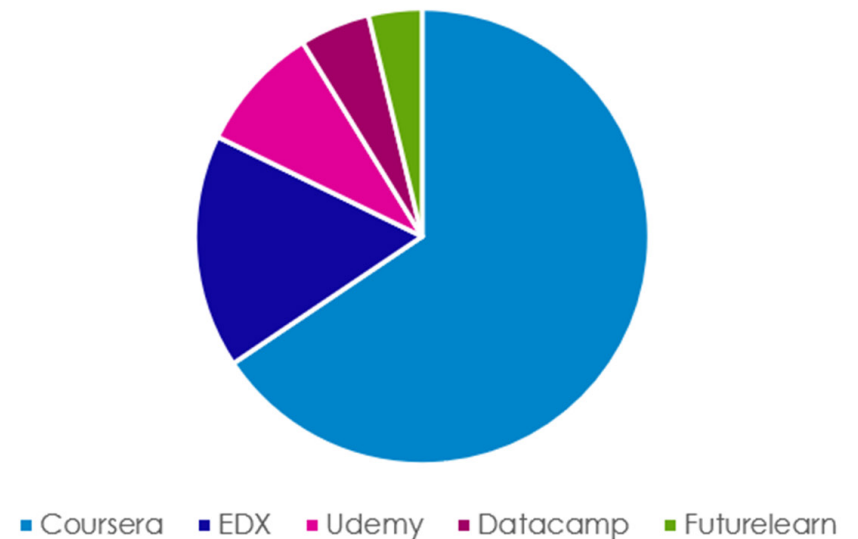
Top Program Areas

The analysis of the top 500 courses offered across the leading online platforms paints a vivid picture of the diverse landscape of micro-credentials. These courses, representing a broad spectrum of program areas, offer valuable insights into the preferences and priorities of learners in the digital age. As directors within higher education institutions consider the strategic development of micro-credential programs, understanding the popularity of different program areas becomes paramount.

Data Science

Data Science emerges as the undisputed leader with a substantial 62 of the 500 top courses. This dominance reflects the growing demand for expertise in data-driven decision-making, machine learning, and statistical analysis. In fact, the Bureau of Labor Statistics indicates that the Data Scientists career is projected to grow by 33.8%, creating over 160,000 new jobs in the next decade. LinkedIn also listed Analytics as the 6th most in-demand skill of 2024.

Business

Business-related micro-credentials claim a significant share, with 51 courses dedicated to this expansive field. This underscores the enduring relevance of business acumen in the professional landscape, where adaptability and strategic thinking are highly prized.

Computer Science

Within the realm of Computer Science, three distinct concentrations stand out. General Computer Science boasts 42 courses, highlighting the foundational programming knowledge sought by learners. Artificial Intelligence and Networking follow closely, each offering 30 and 28 courses, respectively. These program areas underscore the critical role of technology and innovation in contemporary education.

Professional Skills

The category of Professional Skills comprises 27 courses, emphasizing the importance of honing soft skills such as professional communication, office applications, and lifelong learning. As the workforce landscape evolves, competencies such as communication, leadership, and problem-solving become increasingly valuable.
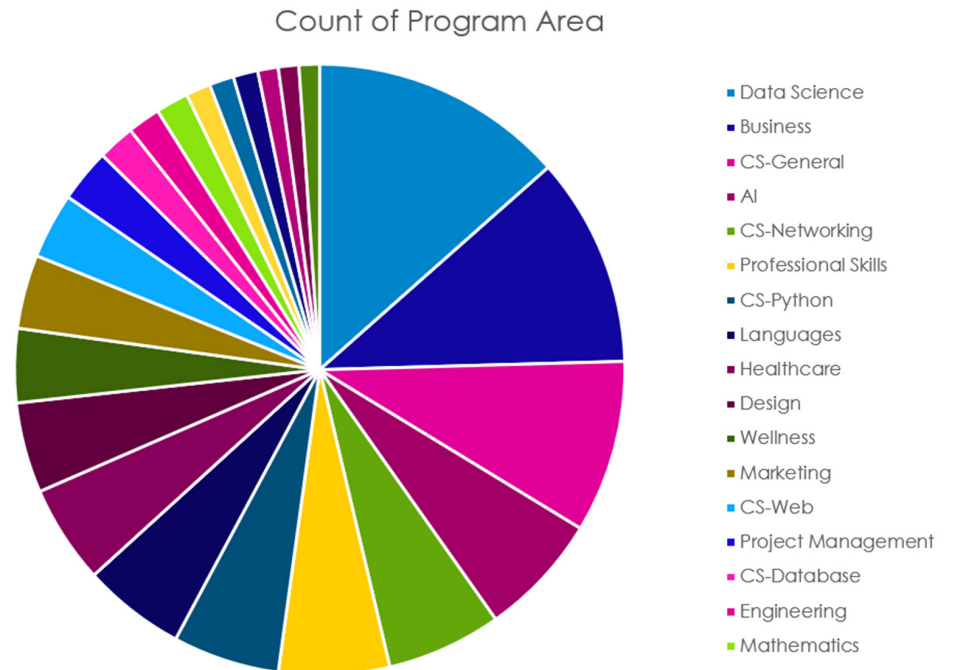
Interdisciplinary Appeal

Micro-credentials extend beyond technical domains, with program areas such as Wellness (18 courses) and Design (22 courses) reflecting a holistic approach to education. These interdisciplinary offerings acknowledge the importance of a well-rounded skill set in today's dynamic job market.

Emerging Frontiers: Cryptocurrency and Cybersecurity

In the ever-evolving digital landscape, niche program areas like Cryptocurrency (5 courses) and Cybersecurity (6 courses) are gaining prominence. These micro-credentials cater to the specialized skills demanded by industries at the forefront of technological advancements.

Strategic Considerations for Directors

Directors within higher education institutions can leverage these insights to strategically shape their micro-credential offerings. Balancing popular program areas with emerging trends and interdisciplinary approaches will be instrumental in meeting the diverse needs of learners and aligning with the evolving demands of the professional landscape.

Count of Program Area

Legend:
- Data Science
- Business
- CS-General
- AI
- CS-Networking
- Professional Skills
- CS-Python
- Languages
- Healthcare
- Design
- Wellness
- Marketing
- CS-Web
- Project Management
- CS-Database
- Engineering
- Mathematics

Top Course Providers

The top 20 course providers, determined by enrollment and course offerings across the most popular online platforms, offer insights into the educational ecosystem. This analysis not only sheds light on the influence of renowned institutions but also underscores the emergence of diverse contributors shaping the micro-credential landscape.

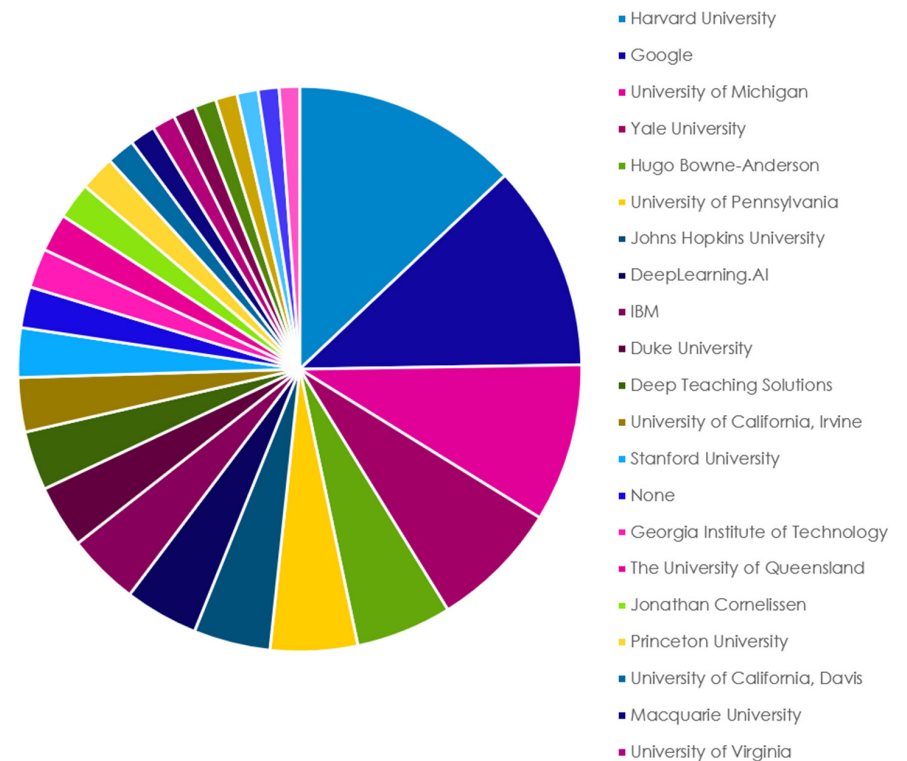## Academic Giants: Harvard, Google, and University of Michigan

Leading the pack, Harvard University stands as the preeminent course provider with an impressive 35 courses and enrollment exceeding 15 million. This dominance underscores the enduring appeal of Ivy League institutions in the digital education realm. Google closely follows with 29 courses and over 14 million enrollments, exemplifying the influence of tech giants in the micro-credential space. The University of Michigan holds a strong position with 24 courses, contributing significantly to the diverse educational offerings available to learners. It's worth noting that both Harvard and the University of Michigan were early entrants in the MOOC space, while Google has recently invested heavily in the space.

Diversity in Contributors

The landscape is marked by a blend of prestigious institutions, lesser-known training companies, and individual contributors. Renowned universities like Yale, University of Pennsylvania, and Johns Hopkins University offer a range of courses, clearly benefiting from their brand-recognition. At the same time, lesser-known contributors such as Hugo Bowne-Anderson, Jonathan Cornelissen, and Deep Teaching Solutions have attracted substantial enrollments, proving that university brand is not the only driver of adoption.

## Strategic Insights for Directors

The prominence of established universities underscores the enduring appeal of institutional brand recognition. Simultaneously, the success of individual contributors highlights the potential impact of specialized, targeted offerings. Lesser-known colleges may still be able to use local brand recognition to distinguish their micro credential offerings within specific geographic regions.

- Harvard University
- Google
- University of Michigan
- Yale University
- Hugo Bowne-Anderson
- University of Pennsylvania
- Johns Hopkins University
- DeepLearning.AI
- IBM
- Duke University
- Deep Teaching Solutions
- University of California, Irvine
- Stanford University
- None
- Georgia Institute of Technology
- The University of Queensland
- Jonathan Cornelissen
- Princeton University
- University of California, Davis
- Macquarie University
- University of Virginia

Pricing Strategies

In the realm of micro-credentials, the pricing strategies employed by online providers are integral to shaping the accessibility and appeal of these educational offerings. Analyzing the pricing dynamics of the courses with highest enrollment reveals a diverse spectrum, ranging from $29.99 to $300, with the median settling at $79.99. The majority of micro-credentials are positioned within the $49 to $150 range, reflecting a market tendency toward moderate pricing. Noteworthy price points that resonate with learners include $27.99, $74.99, $199, and $99. This nuanced data provides directors with valuable insights into the varied pricing strategies that can influence the success and adoption of micro-credentials within the higher education landscape.

Price Range of Most Popular Courses
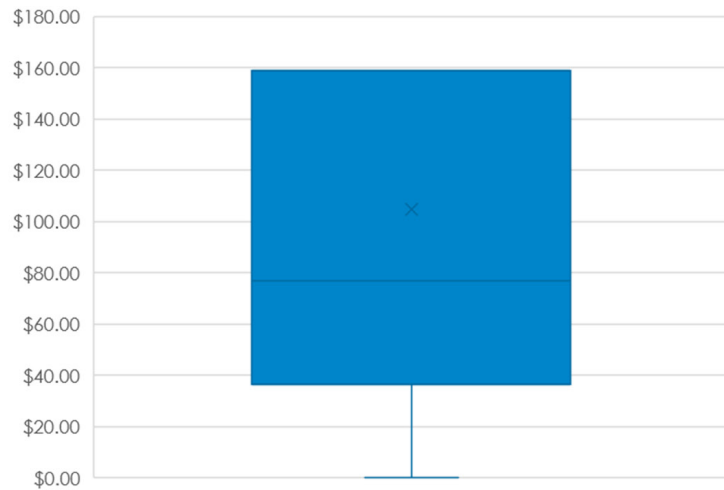
Pricing Distribution
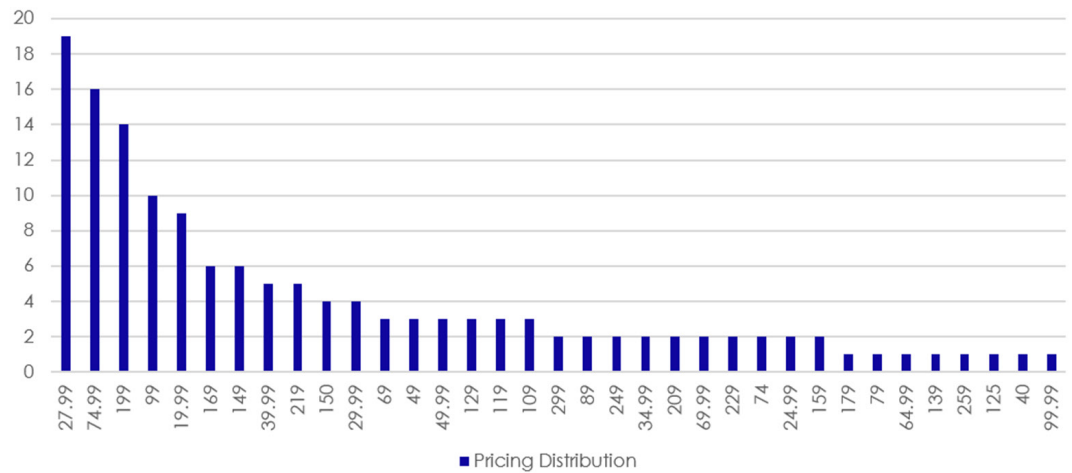
In the following sections, we delve deeper into how each major platform uses pricing as a key part of their strategies.

Coursera: A Multifaceted Approach

Subscription Model:
Coursera adopts a versatile subscription model, offering learners unlimited access to most courses and specializations for a monthly fee of $49. This approach caters to individuals seeking ongoing and varied learning experiences.

Individual Course Purchase:
For those with specific learning objectives, Coursera allows the individual purchase of certain courses at varying prices, ranging from $39 to $99 or more. This model provides flexibility for learners with distinct educational needs.

Special MasterTrack® Certificates:
Coursera introduces MasterTrack® Certificates, offering segments of Master's degrees with the possibility of credit transfer into full programs at partnering universities. While these often come with higher fees, they provide a pathway for learners to progress toward advanced degrees.

Financial Aid:
To enhance inclusivity, Coursera extends financial aid options to learners based on their needs, reinforcing their commitment to accessibility.

edX: A Blend of Free and Premium Offerings

Free Courses:
edX contributes to open access education by providing many courses for free, albeit with limited access to materials and without certificates. This serves as a gateway for learners to explore diverse topics without financial commitment.

Verified Certificates:
For those seeking recognition, verified certificates for individual courses are available at a price range of $49 to $120. These certificates grant lifetime access and often involve graded assignments, enhancing the value for learners.

Professional Certificate Programs:
edX introduces Professional Certificate Programs, bundling several courses focused on career-oriented skills. Priced between $499 and $999, these programs provide a comprehensive and specialized learning experience.

MicroMasters® Programs:
Similar to professional certificates, MicroMasters® Programs offer graduate-level credit applicable to Master's degrees at partnering universities. Priced higher due to the credit-bearing nature, these programs cater to learners aspiring for advanced academic recognition.

Financial Aid:
edX, like Coursera, acknowledges the importance of financial aid, making it available for learners based on their needs to ensure broader accessibility.

Udemy:
Emphasizing Affordability and Flexibility

Individual Course Purchase:

Udemy adopts a predominant individual course purchase model, with prices highly variable, ranging from $9.99 to $199.99. Frequent sales and discounts often bring these prices down to as low as $10-$20, emphasizing affordability.

Subscription Plans:

Udemy offers optional monthly or annual subscription plans at $16.58 per month or $119.88 per year, providing unlimited access to a curated subset of courses. This model appeals to learners seeking continuous access to diverse content.

Focus on Individual Instructors:

Prices on Udemy can vary based on the reputation of individual instructors and the features of their courses, fostering a marketplace where educators' expertise directly influences pricing.

LinkedIn Learning:
Aligning with Professional Development

Subscription Model:

LinkedIn Learning centers its pricing around subscription models, offering monthly access at $39.99 or an annual commitment at $26.99 per month. This structure provides flexibility for learners engaged in continuous professional development.

Individual Course Purchase:

While primarily subscription-focused, LinkedIn Learning also allows the individual purchase of certain courses, typically priced between $20 and $50. This provides an alternative for those with specific learning objectives.

Focus on Professional Development:

LinkedIn Learning strategically aligns its courses with current job market trends and skills, positioning itself as a go-to platform for professionals seeking career-oriented education.

Platform	Pricing
Coursera	**Subscription model:** Offers a monthly subscription ($49 per month) that provides unlimited access to most courses and specializations. **Individual course purchase:** Allows purchasing of some individual courses at varying prices ($39-$99 or more). **Special MasterTrack® Certificates:** These offer portions of Master's degrees with credit applied if accepted into the full program at the partnering university, often with higher fees compared to regular courses. **Financial aid:** Available for some learners based on needs.
edX	**Free courses:** Many courses are offered for free with limited access to materials and no certificate. **Verified certificates:** Verified certificates for individual courses cost $49-$120, granting lifetime access and graded assignments. **Professional certificate programs:** These combine several courses focused on specific career-oriented skills, ranging in price from $499-$999. **MicroMasters® programs:** Similar to professional certificates but offer graduate-level credit that may apply to Master's degrees at partnering universities, with higher fees. **Financial aid:** Available for some learners based on needs.
Udemy	**Individual course purchase:** Predominant model, with individual courses priced highly variably ranging from $9.99 to $199.99, but frequent sales and discounts to as low as $10-$20. **Subscription plans:** Offers optional monthly or annual plans ($16.58/month or $119.88/year) for unlimited access to a subset of courses. **Focus on individual instructors:** Prices can vary based on instructor reputation and course features.
LinkedIn Learning	**Subscription model:** Offers monthly ($39.99) or annual ($26.99/month) subscriptions for unlimited access to all courses. **Individual course purchase:** Some courses available for individual purchase, typically priced between $20-$50. **Focus on professional development:** Courses align with current job market trends and skills.

Strategic Considerations for Directors

Directors within higher education institutions can glean strategic insights from these diverse pricing models:

▶ **Tailoring Offerings:** Consider offering a blend of subscription models, individual course purchases, and credit-bearing programs to cater to a diverse audience.

▶ **Financial Inclusivity:** Explore options for financial aid to enhance accessibility and promote inclusivity.

▶ **Strategic Partnerships:** Collaborate with local industry leaders to align course offerings with current market trends and employer demands.

▶ **Flexibility and Affordability:** Emphasize affordability through discounted pricing, subscription plans, and sales to appeal to a wide range of learners.

The Evolution of Free Trials: A Distinctive Trend

The majority of major platforms have embraced the evolution of trial strategies, providing users with a taste of their courses before committing to a purchase. This practice, while not prevalent in traditional universities' marketing, has become commonplace among large online course platforms, enticing potential learners and fostering a sense of confidence in the product.

Coursera: A Week-Long Exploration

Coursera adopts a 7-day free trial strategy for most of its courses. This allows learners to delve into the content, evaluate the course structure, and gauge its alignment with their learning objectives. Select courses are also available for free auditing, providing an additional avenue for exploration before making a financial commitment for certification.

edX: Temporary Free Access

EdX, in alignment with industry trends, offers temporary, free access to "audit" the majority of its courses. Learners can explore the content without immediate financial obligation, with the option to purchase the course if they exceed the allotted trial time or if they aim to earn a certificate of completion.

LinkedIn Learning: An Extended Exploration Window

LinkedIn Learning distinguishes itself by offering a generous 1-month free trial period, surpassing the trial durations of many vendors in the micro-credential landscape. This extended trial duration allows users to extensively explore the platform's offerings, potentially increasing the likelihood of continued engagement and subscription.

Strategic Implications for Directors

As directors within higher education institutions contemplate the integration of micro-credentials into their offerings, the trial strategies of major online platforms offer strategic insights:

- ▶ **Engagement Enhancement:** Consider implementing trial periods or preview options to allow potential learners to experience the value of micro-credentials before committing financially.

- ▶ **Competitive Edge:** Evaluate the duration of trial periods to ensure competitiveness in the market, recognizing that an extended trial period may attract more learners.

- ▶ **Market Dynamics:** Recognize the shift in marketing dynamics, where digital platforms leverage trial strategies as effective tools to capture and retain learner interest.

Crafting Compelling Course Websites: A Critical Element in Micro-Credential Success

The success of online course platforms often revolves around their adeptness in conveying the unique value propositions of their offerings. Successful platforms emphasize the significance of targeted marketing strategies, aligning their promotional efforts with the evolving needs and preferences of potential learners.

Optimization for Search Engines

Leading platforms recognize the importance of search engine optimization (SEO) in attracting potential learners. Course descriptions are meticulously crafted to incorporate relevant keywords, ensuring higher visibility in search engine results.

Detailed Tables of Contents

Courses that garner high enrollment often present detailed tables of contents. These structures provide a transparent overview of the course content, allowing learners (or corporate purchasers) to assess the relevance and alignment with their learning objectives. The terms found in the tables of contents can also play a significant role in improving search engine optimization (SEO).

Demonstration Lessons

Many successful courses offer demonstration lessons, providing a sneak peek into the learning experience. These snippets offer potential learners a firsthand view of the course format, teaching style, and overall educational approach.

User Ratings and Reviews

User ratings and reviews play a crucial role in shaping the perception of a course. High-enrollment courses often feature authentic feedback from learners, contributing to a sense of trust and credibility among prospective students.

Estimated Times for Completion

Providing estimated times for course completion is a common practice among successful micro-credential courses. This transparency allows learners to gauge the time investment required, aligning expectations and promoting informed decision-making.

Strategic Considerations for Directors

Directors within higher education institutions can draw strategic considerations from the success patterns observed in high-enrollment courses:

- ▶ **Investment in Presentation:** Prioritize the development of compelling course descriptions, ensuring they are optimized for search engines to enhance discoverability.

- ▶ **Transparency and Clarity:** Provide detailed tables of contents to offer a clear roadmap of the learning journey, fostering trust and engagement among potential learners.

- ▶ **Interactive Preview:** Consider incorporating demonstration lessons to showcase the interactive and engaging nature of the learning experience.

- ▶ **Leveraging User Testimonials:** Encourage and showcase user ratings and reviews to build credibility and instill confidence in prospective learners.

- ▶ **Setting Realistic Expectations:** Clearly communicate estimated times for completion to manage learner expectations and promote commitment.

Course Design of Most Successful Courses

This section unveils key insights into the course structure, design elements, and assessment strategies that characterize successful micro-credential programs.

Course Length Dynamics

Examining the top 20 courses by enrollment reveals a diverse array of topics, platforms, and durations. While the topics and platforms vary widely, there is a prevailing trend in course lengths, with the majority falling within the 15 to 40 hours of seat time range. Notable outliers include courses spanning 4 hours and 240 hours, the latter being an option that extends college credit—a distinctive feature worth highlighting.

Structured Course Design

The course design landscape of leading micro-credential programs is characterized by modular structures. Courses are organized into modules, each featuring concise video-based lectures lasting between 2 and 15 minutes. Subject matter experts often lead these lectures, accompanied by conceptual graphics, videos, screenshares, and animations. The flexibility of video content, allowing rewinding and rewatching, coupled with customizable playback settings, enhances the learning experience. It's essential to note that completion of all videos is typically a prerequisite for earning credit in most online courses.

Additionally, many of the top courses incorporate reading materials, marking a departure from traditional higher education formats where readings are often distinct from lectures. The prevailing trend in micro-credentials leans towards a video-centric approach, emphasizing the dynamic and engaging nature of multimedia content.

Assessment Strategies

Assessment methodologies within micro-credentials are multifaceted, combining automatically scored quizzes with interactive components. Most platforms mandate a minimum score for quiz completion, allowing students the flexibility to retake quizzes to achieve a passing grade. Notably, a subset of micro-credential programs goes beyond auto-graded quizzes, integrating projects or more elaborate assignments into the learning journey.

Some platforms offer automated scoring for these assignments, while others introduce a peer-review element, allowing learners to evaluate and provide feedback on each other's work. A select few micro-credential platforms distinguish themselves by incorporating subject matter expert responses and grading for projects, enhancing the depth of the assessment process.

Particularly innovative platforms, exemplified by DataCamp, introduce sophisticated frameworks for hands-on projects, featuring automatic grading capabilities. This nuanced approach positions certain platforms as leaders in providing practical, real-world application scenarios for learners.

Pedagogical Trends for Directors

Directors within higher education institutions can distill valuable insights from the course design trends:

▶ **Emphasis on Modularity:** Structuring courses in modular formats, supported by brief video lectures and supplementary reading materials, aligns with the preferences of micro-credential learners. Strategic planning of modules can allow reuse within certain courses or easy mix and matching for custom corporate courses.

▶ **Assessment Innovation:** Integrating a mix of automatically scored quizzes, peer-reviewed assignments, and subject matter expert feedback contributes to a comprehensive and dynamic learning experience.

▶ **Hands-On Learning Platforms:** Platforms or processes that facilitate hands-on projects present innovative avenues for practical skill development within micro-credentials.

Part II – How Local Universities Can Compete

Local Universities and Micro-Credentials: Opportunities for Distinction

In the burgeoning micro-credential landscape dominated by major online course platforms, local universities can still find strategic avenues to distinguish themselves. This section illuminates key indicators and advantages that empower local institutions to carve a distinctive niche within the evolving micro-credential market.

Customized Training Partnerships

Contrary to the dominance of major online platforms, local universities possess a unique advantage in building tailored solutions. An UPCEA survey reveals a significant trend, with 76% of employers actively collaborating with local universities to craft bespoke training programs for their workforce. This collaborative approach allows local institutions to directly address the specific needs of regional industries, fostering a symbiotic relationship between academia and the local workforce.

Geographic Proximity in Student Preferences

A notable advantage for local universities emerges from the geographical preferences of learners. According to research, 67% of students opt for online courses located within 50 miles of their residence. This preference aligns with search engine algorithms that prioritize location, benefiting local educational institutions by enhancing their visibility in search results. As search engines favor proximity, local universities have a unique opportunity to leverage this trend, becoming the preferred choice for students searching for micro-credential programs.

Emphasis on Hands-On Learning

In the pursuit of effective workforce development, local universities gain further traction by addressing a critical aspect highlighted in a Jenzabar survey. A striking 95% of HR executives acknowledge the imperative for employees to receive more hands-on practice than conventional online training typically offers. This insight underscores the value of experiential learning and positions local institutions favorably. By incorporating hands-on components into micro-credential programs, local universities can meet the demand for practical skill development, aligning seamlessly with employer expectations.

Stackable Credits

For many nontraditional learners, micro credentials represent a faster and less expensive means to earning credentials compared to traditional two- and four-year degree paths. These credentials may be earned over long periods of time. One competitive advantage that higher education institutions have over online course platforms is the ability to apply credentials earned in micro credential courses to

Strategic Insights for Directors

Directors within higher education institutions can draw actionable insights from these trends to position their institutions advantageously:

- ▶ **Customization and Collaboration:** Foster collaborative partnerships with local industries to design custom training pro-grams, addressing specific regional workforce needs.

- ▶ **Geographic Appeal:** Leverage the preference for local learning by optimizing online micro-credential programs that align with the geographic proximity of potential students.

- ▶ **Embrace Experiential Learning:** Recognize the demand for hands-on practice highlighted by HR executives, and strategically incorporate experiential elements into micro-credential offerings.

Strategic Content Development for Micro-Credentials

In the realm of micro-credentials, strategic content development stands as a linchpin for the success of higher education institutions. This section delves into the imperative of creating modularized content intricately aligned with the most sought-after jobs and skills. By adopting a modular approach, institutions can ensure the adaptability and tailorability of their content, facilitating seamless customization for corporate partnerships and addressing the dynamic demands of the job market.

Modularization for Customization

The key to a responsive micro-credential program lies in the modularization of content. By structuring courses into distinct modules, institutions empower themselves to swiftly customize offerings, meeting the specific needs and preferences of corporate partners. This modular approach allows for a nimble response to the evolving landscape of skills and job requirements, ensuring that micro-credentials remain relevant and applicable.

Alignment with In-Demand Jobs and Skills

An essential foundation for content development is the alignment with the most in-demand jobs and skills. Platforms like LinkedIn annually release a list of the most sought-after skills, providing valuable insights into market trends. Concurrently, the Bureau of Labor Statistics tracks the highest-growth jobs, offering a comprehensive understanding of workforce dynamics. It is imperative for institutions to overlay this national data with regional considerations, identifying the unique demands of their local job markets.

Regional Relevance

In the pursuit of creating impactful micro-credential content, institutions must seamlessly integrate regional relevance. By aligning program offerings with the specific growth sectors and skill demands of the local economy, institutions can establish themselves as key contributors to regional workforce development. This intersection of national trends with regional nuances ensures that micro-credentials resonate with both broader industry needs and the specific requirements of the communities they serve.

Strategic Insights for Directors

Directors within higher education institutions can derive actionable insights from these trends to inform their content development strategies:

- ▶ **Modularization for Agility:** Embrace modular content development to enhance the agility and customization potential of micro-credentials, aligning with corporate partner needs.

- ▶ **Leverage Industry Insights:** Regularly consult sources like LinkedIn's in-demand skills list and the Bureau of Labor Statistics to inform content development, ensuring alignment with national job trends.

- ▶ **Regional Integration:** Overlay national insights with regional considerations to tailor micro-credentials to the specific demands of the local job market, establishing institutions as pivotal contributors to regional workforce development.

Instructor Engagement in Micro-Credentials: A Local Advantage

The Limitations of Massive Scale

Major online course providers, given their vast scale, encounter inherent challenges in providing direct access to instructors. The sheer magnitude of their operations makes individualized interaction and engagement a logistical challenge. As a result, learners often experience a disconnect in accessing the personalized guidance and mentorship that is crucial for effective skill development.

Local Universities: The Infrastructure Advantage

Local colleges and universities stand out by virtue of their inherent infrastructure and staffing capabilities. Unlike their online counterparts, these institutions possess the organizational structure to facilitate direct access to instructors. This infrastructure lends itself to a more personalized and engaging learning experience, fostering a sense of connection and support for learners pursuing micro-credentials.

Project-Based Courses and Instructor Interaction

A strategic approach employed by local institutions is the integration of project-based courses with direct instructor and/or cohort interaction. This dynamic combination enhances the learning journey, providing learners with hands-on training and mentorship that goes beyond what large online course providers can offer. The collaborative and interactive nature of such courses aligns with the evolving needs of corporations seeking impactful and practical skill development for their workforce.

Strategic Implications for Directors

Directors within higher education institutions can glean strategic insights from the advantages of instructor engagement:

- ▶ **Leverage Local Infrastructure:** Capitalize on the inherent infrastructure and staffing capabilities of local institutions to offer direct access to instructors, setting the stage for enhanced learner support.

- ▶ **Project-Based Learning:** Integrate project-based courses with direct instructor and cohort interaction to create a differentiated micro-credentialing experience, meeting the demand for hands-on training.

- ▶ **Address Corporate Needs:** Recognize the value of providing corporations with tailored hands-on training, positioning local institutions as responsive partners attuned to corporate learning requirements.

Stackable Credentials and Planning

The concept of stackable credentials introduces a layer of complexity that necessitates careful planning. This strategic approach involves creating a framework where students can seamlessly apply alternative credentials towards credit-bearing tracks. The potential for flexibility and fluidity in credential pathways can significantly enhance the appeal and utility of micro-credential programs.

Incentivizing Credit-Bearing Tracks

A distinctive incentive, often absent in the offerings of major online course platforms, lies in the capacity for students to apply alternative credentials towards credit-bearing tracks. This forward-thinking approach not only aligns with the evolving needs of learners but also positions institutions as dynamic and responsive to the diverse educational journeys of their students.

Strategic Guidance for Directors

Directors within higher education institutions can draw strategic guidance from these considerations:

▶ **Plan for Stackable Credentials:** Implement stackable credential frameworks to offer students flexible pathways toward credit-bearing tracks.

▶ **Incentivize Learning Journeys:** Introduce the capability for students to apply alternative credentials towards credit-bearing tracks as a unique incentive, aligning with the evolving needs of learners.

▶ **Leverage Regional Brand Equity:** Capitalize on the regional brand equity of the institution, emphasizing its unique identity and reputation within the local community.

▶ **Align with Geographic Preferences:** Strategically align online micro-credential offerings with the geographic preferences of learners, optimizing search results and appealing to the inclination for proximity in online learning.

Summary

Higher Education institutions who have made micro credentials a strategic initiative can glean insights from the mature and competitive OPM and MOOC space, where the design, marketing and sale of micro credentials has been evolving for more than a decade. These insights include:

Pricing

Moderate pricing between $40 and $80 is the most prevalent among the most popular courses. Most have also adopted subscription-based pricing that allows students access to all or a portion of their libraries. Those with the greatest brand recognition tend to have prices well above this norm.

Brand Recognition

Most of the successful programs are aligned with well-known universities or corporate brands. Universities should not be shy about leveraging their local brand equity in the promotion of micro credentials.

Marketing

The way in which successful OPMs and MOOCs promote their micro credentials tends to be far more sophisticated than the average higher education institution. Specifically, their course websites tend to include SEO-friendly descriptions, tables of contents, free previews, and user ratings for both course and instructors.

Course Design

Courses with high ratings and enrollments tend to be between 20 and 40 hours in length, broken into short (reusable) modules. Lectures are video-based and extremely short (3-20 minutes) in length. Most courses employ self-graded quizzes throughout and allow students to take the quizzes multiple times to pass. Building processes and systems to efficiently develop similar curriculum will enable universities to develop well received curriculum.

Differentiation

There are certain areas where traditional higher education institutions hold an advantage over OPMs and MOOCs. Namely, local brand recognition, local corporate partnerships, and the ability to recruit directly to current students. Further, traditional schools are set up to offer more hands-on training than most major online platforms can. Leveraging all of these factors are keys to successful micro credential strategies.

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- **rc** Recruitment
- **rt** Retention
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About Jenzabar

Created out of a passion for education and a vision for technology, Jenzabar offers disruptive, innovative software solutions and services that empower students' success and helps higher education institutions meet the demands of the modern student. Over 1,350 higher educational campuses harness Jenzabar solutions for improved performance across campus and a more personalized and connected experience for the student. For further information, please visit jenzabar.com or on X **@Jenzabar** or **LinkedIn**.

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