

# What are microcredentials? And are they worth having?

March 20 2024, by Daniel Douglas

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As [private firms](#) and [governments](#) struggle to fill jobs—and with the cost of college [too high](#) for many students—[employers](#) and [elected officials](#) are searching for alternative ways for people to get good jobs without having to earn a traditional college degree.

Microcredentials are one such alternative. But just what are microcredentials? And do they lead to better jobs and higher earnings?

As a [sociologist](#) who has examined the [research on microcredentials](#), the best available answer right now is: It depends on what a person is studying.

## Defining the term

While there is no official definition of a microcredential, there are some broadly accepted components. Like traditional degrees, microcredentials certify peoples' skills and knowledge, ranging in scope from software skills like Microsoft Excel to broad abilities like project management.

Microcredentials typically indicate "[competencies](#)"—that is, things people can do. They are represented by [digital badges](#), which are emblems that can be shared online. Just as a diploma verifies a degree-holder's achievement, badges verify microcredentials. An employer can click on the digital badge to see who awarded it, when it was awarded and what it represents.

Microcredentials also allow people to verify what they already know, such as a person who is an experienced Python coder, or what they acquire through short-term learning and assessments. An experienced coder in the Python programming language could take an assessment and earn a microcredential, as could a novice after completing a

programming course. Either way, microcredentials "[allow an individual to show mastery in a certain area](#)."

What usually distinguishes microcredentials from other short-term learning, like [nondegree certificates](#), is duration. Certificates typically take longer. The other difference is location: Microcredentials are typically completed online.

Data from [Credential Engine](#), a [nonprofit organization](#) that catalogs education and training credentials, and [Class Central](#), a searchable index of online courses, indicate that business, IT and programming, and [health care](#) are popular focus areas for microcredentials.

## A growing trend

Many colleges and universities, such as [SUNY](#), [Oregon State](#) and [Harvard](#), offer microcredentials. But they are also offered through social media companies like [LinkedIn Learning](#) and private providers like [EdX](#) and [Coursera](#). Professional organizations like the [National Education Association](#) also award microcredentials.

Some microcredentials directly prepare learners to become industry certified—like SkillStorm's CompTIA A+ certification, [an eight-week online course](#) that prepares learners to work in IT support and help desk roles. Others focus on general employability skills—like Binghamton University's [course in career readiness](#), which helps learners develop their resume, cover letter and LinkedIn profile. It also provides a mock interview opportunity. Some microcredentials are "[stackable](#)"—meaning that they indicate related skills. Someone pursuing a health care career, for example, might earn stackable microcredentials in clinical medical assisting, phlebotomy and as an electrocardiogram—or EKG—technician.

Some microcredential programs are [credit-bearing](#) and may serve as

entry points to degree or certificate programs.

Because of the short duration of microcredential programs, most are not regulated by Title IV of the [U.S. Higher Education Act](#) and are not typically eligible for federal financial aid, which only covers programs lasting 15 weeks or longer.

If Congress passes the [Bipartisan Workforce Pell Act](#), some microcredentials—those that last eight weeks or more—could become eligible for financial aid. But until there is a final bill, it is unclear whether and how legislation would impact learners pursuing microcredentials. The bill was set to be considered on Feb. 28, 2024, but that [vote has been postponed](#).

## Who seeks microcredentials?

In 2021 and 2022, my colleagues and I surveyed [more than 300 students pursuing noncredit programs](#) at two community colleges. The students are similar to microcredential seekers in that they're doing short-term programs that are often hybrid or fully online.

Our survey showed that the vast majority—over 90%—were over 25 years old and that most—over 65%—had prior college experience, including many who had earned degrees or certificates.

The majority of surveyed students indicated that their programs were either free or employer-sponsored. About a fourth said they wanted to get out of low-wage jobs or advance in their current jobs. Between 35% and 50% said they wanted to explore a career change.

Many noncredit programs at [community colleges](#) are offered partially or fully in-person, while microcredentials are more typically earned online. While online programs may be convenient, they are also known for [high](#)

[withdrawal rates](#). Nondegree programs of study also have very [low completion rates](#).

## Which microcredentials pay off?

Credentials in traditionally male-dominated fields, such as IT and construction specialties, yielded substantial benefits—lower unemployment rates and far higher wages. Credentials in female-dominated fields, such as education and administrative support, yielded little to no benefit in terms of either employment rates or earnings. These findings come from a 2019 [survey of adults without degrees](#).

The bottom line is that salaries can [vary widely](#). For instance, people in fields such as IT cloud computing may see a pay boost of US\$20,000, whereas people in office administration and certain education-related jobs may not see any salary increase. Credentials in these fields are less likely to be employer-sponsored.

Should you get a microcredential? The answer certainly depends on your current employment situation—including your employer's willingness to sponsor training—and your career goals. While [95% of employers see benefits](#) in their employees earning a microcredential, 46% are "unsure of the quality of education" represented by microcredentials, and 33% are unsure of their alignment with industry standards.

Given the lack of systematic evidence at this point, I believe their concerns are warranted. Federal and state regulation could lead to better data collection and more quality control for microcredentials.

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