# Report and Recommendations of the Microcredentialing Work Group

October 5, 2021

**Microcredentialing Work Group Member List**

Phyllis King (co-lead), Associate Vice Chancellor, Academic Affairs

Laura Pedrick (co-lead), Executive Director, UWM Online, Academic Affairs

Jennifer Doering, Associate Dean for Academic Affairs, College of Nursing

Tina Freiburger, Dean of the Helen Bader School of Social Welfare

Bryce Lord, Associate Director, Helen Bader Institute for Nonprofit Management

Thomas Malaby, Professor of Anthropology, College of Letters and Science

Ethan Munson, Associate Dean, College of Engineering & Applied Science

Jason Puskar, Interim Dean of the Graduate School

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## Introduction

In May 2021 the Microcredentialing Working Group (MWG) was charged by Provost Britz with the following tasks:

> The Microcredentialing Working Group will serve to establish a theory of action/strategy for microcredentialing on campus, identify support models, timelines and the development of materials that guide implementation, with an initial focus on developing microcredentials related to existing academic offerings. The Group will establish a community of practice and communication channels to inform all stakeholders.

The MWG has explored the development of a coordinated, comprehensive system of for-credit microcredentialing at UWM. This has included an assessment of potential benefits, national precedents, and policy implications. The MWG has produced a statement of guiding principles, the definition of key terms, a draft of a comprehensive campus policy, and use cases designed to identify the most likely options for microcredential design at UWM, all detailed in the following sections of this report.

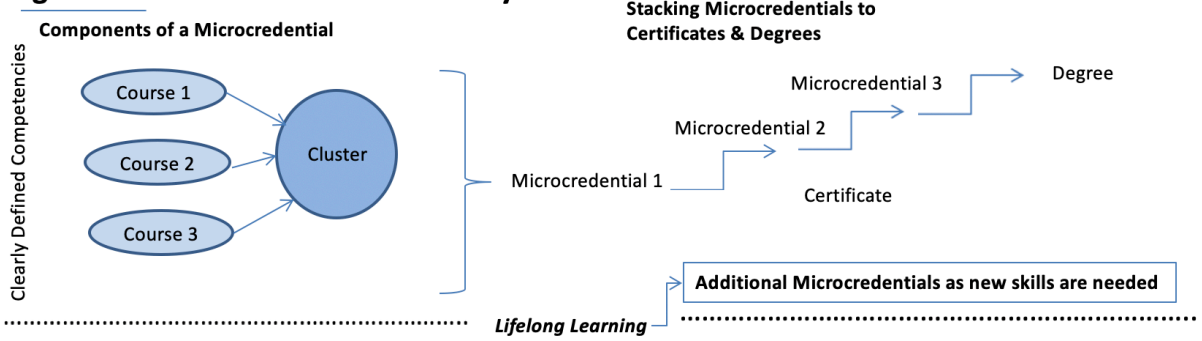
We define microcredentials as for-credit credentials that are smaller than a certificate (usually a minimum of 15 credits for both graduate and undergraduate certificates) but larger than a single course. To differentiate them from other credentials, including degrees, certificates, concentrations, minors, emphases, and more, we refer to them as "Clusters," which we envision being fewer than 12 credits in size.

## Why Microcredentials?

While microcredentials are too new for their impact to be fully assessed, numerous commentators and organizations have identified the unbundling of higher education into smaller components as a key trend shaping the future of learning (see References). The traditional sequencing of education into work will be complemented by a "braided model," in which there is an interwoven flow between education and work across the lifespan.

Figure 1 shows how programmatic redesign could reshape higher education through learning experiences that feature shorter, stackable microcredentials.

**Figure 1. The Microcredential Pathway**



*Microcredentials for Student Recruitment*

Although microcredentials might be recruiting tools for vocational training or in community college, in liberal arts education or at the research university we find little evidence that are driving new enrollment. Those universities leading the nation in microcredentialing, such as SUNY Buffalo, have confirmed to us that they have not yet seen significant recruiting benefits at the undergraduate or graduate level. However, in some professional fields where microcredentials have been most popular, such as health sciences, there may be overall enrollment benefits. While the full potential of microcredentials is, as yet, unclear, there is wide interest in their potential: In a July 2021 survey of 600+ higher education leaders, 71% of respondents indicated that microcredentials could help their institutions meet enrollment goals (UPCEA & Evollution, 2021).

*Microcredentials to Signal Student Competencies*

It seems clearer that microcredentials can meaningfully indicate marketable skills, abilities, and competencies that otherwise might not be visible in the degree. Because microcredentials are listed on the transcript, they can be readily added to resumes and CVs. Because they will be recognized with the awarding of digital badges, they can be promoted on LinkedIn and other career networking sites. For example, an engineering master's student might earn a microcredential in professional writing, an ability that otherwise might be hard for potential employers to discern. A history major might earn a microcredential in cultural competency related to race, which might make them attractive to a wider range of employers. In order to exploit the full range of career benefits, we propose that all UWM microcredentials expressly identify the National Association of Colleges and Employers' Career Readiness Competencies provided.

At this early stage in the development of microcredentials nationally, there is not yet solid evidence for the career benefits of microcredentialing for students who earn them. Employers profess interest and enthusiasm, but some have noted that microcredentials are not showing up in job ads just yet. There is movement toward skills-based hiring, however, and if past recessions are a guide, it will increase during a post-pandemic recovery (Vander Ark, 2021).

*Microcredentials for Motivation and Retention*

We suspect that microcredentials might be most appealing to students as a "value-add" to existing degrees, and thus aid in student satisfaction and overall retention. For example, organizing General Education Requirements into stackable microcredentials might make them seem more relevant to undergraduates, who sometimes struggle to understand why General Education is a core part of their degree. Some have even suggested that the "gamification" of college credentialing could motivate undergraduates to complete degree requirements. At the graduate level, where microcredentials have been more appealing to students at research universities to date, microcredentials might help students frame their intellectual commitments. Clusters in feminism, ethics, statistics, community engagement, or marketing might help graduate students organize their coursework more purposefully and communicate their competencies more clearly.

**Policy and Administration**

In envisioning a policy framework for microcredential clusters at UWM, our goal has been maximum flexibility. Time limits should be generous and prerequisites minimal. And unlike other credentials, microcredentials should have no limits on double counting credits between a cluster and a certificate or degree. In fact, a degree might be made up entirely of stackable clusters. Clusters should also be permitted to share credit with one another, though some reasonable limit on credit sharing will need to be defined. However, because clusters are meant to organize coursework specifically at UWM, we recommend limits on transferring coursework into clusters at the undergraduate level, and we recommend not allowing transfer credit at the graduate level, unless it is part of a UWM-designed prior learning assessment bridge from non-credit to credit (for example, TechEd Frontiers).

We have given considerable thought to the administrative overhead required. SUNY Buffalo has a dedicated staff person in a microcredentials office to oversee microcredentialing, which UWM will not likely be able to provide. As a result, UWM's administration of microcredentials must be designed as a lean process, requiring minimal additional administrative work on the part of the Registrar's Office, graduation examiners, and program faculty and staff. There should be no formal admission to a cluster as there is to a certificate. Programs will handle most of the advising for students seeking the credit required for a cluster, and students will alert programs when it is time for undergraduate or graduate registrars to post a new microcredential to the transcript.

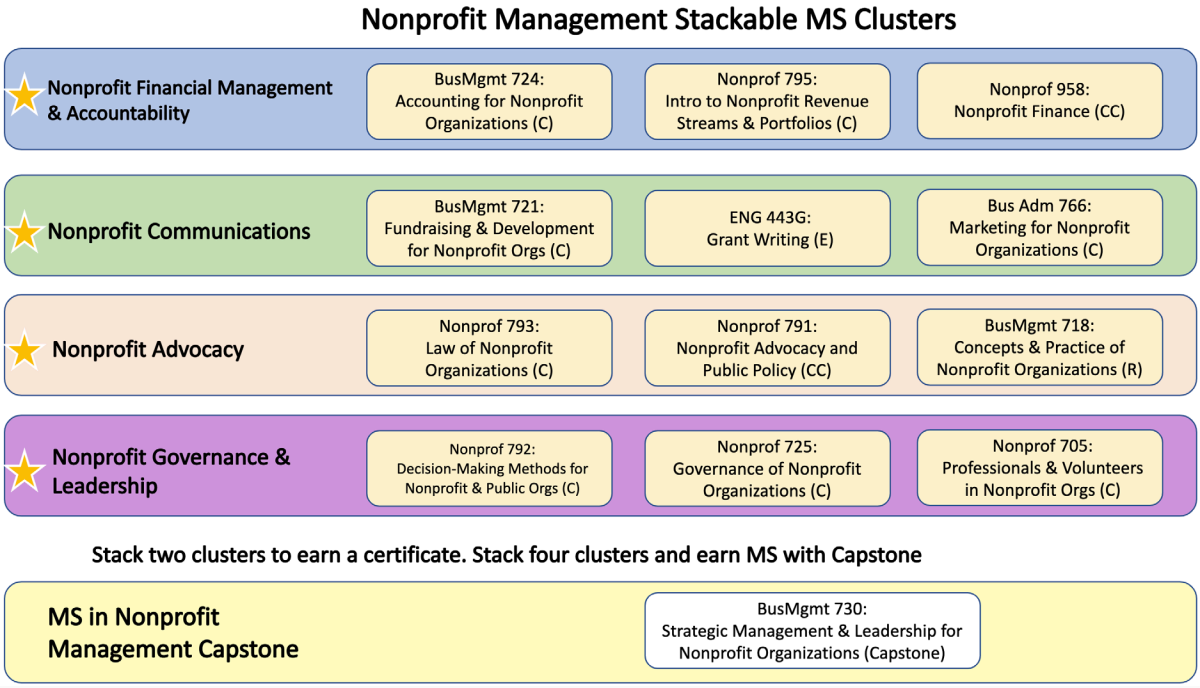
To lower the barrier for the approval of new clusters, a simple fillable web form should be used. This will standardize the first steps of the governance process, ensure regularity of form and function, and reduce time spent in individual consultations. We recommend that a Microcredential Review Group (MWG) be established in Academic Affairs to consult with those proposing new undergraduate and graduate clusters and to review their proposals prior to the start of the governance process. For the purposes of the Academic Approval Matrix, a new cluster will be considered a new submajor.

**Design**

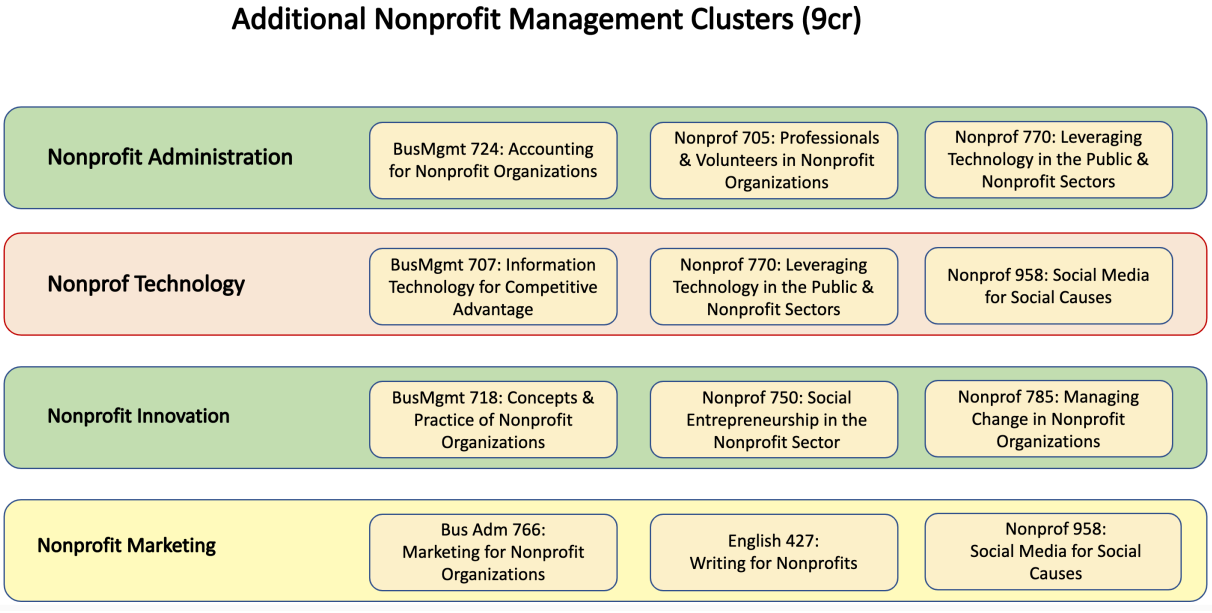
Following the example set by SUNY-Buffalo, the MWG developed a set of use cases for the Humanities, Social Sciences, and Computer Science (See the Appendix). A visualization of how the microcredential approach would work was developed for the Master's in Nonprofit Management (see Figure 2).

Four primary clusters were identified from within the master's curriculum, for a total of 27 credits. A student who completes the four clusters and a capstone course would earn the master's degree. Additional course combinations were also identified that could provide other cluster pathways through the program as well (see Figure 3).

## Figure 2. MS in Nonprofit Management Microcredential Design Possibilities




## Figure 3. Options



**Recommendations**

After reviewing the microcredentialing landscape and deliberating on a 'best fit' approach for UWM, the MWG has produced a set of ten recommendations:

1. Adopt a common terminology related to microcredentialing and badging.
2. Seek governance approval for a new policy on microcredentialing.
3. Design a simplified template for proposing new microcredentials.
4. Share microcredentialing best practices and use cases with faculty, staff, and administrators.
5. Create two new web pages:
    a. A student-facing website to promote UWM's microcredentials
    b. A faculty/staff/administrator-facing website to share campus practices
6. Establish a Microcredentials Review Group in Academic Affairs to facilitate the creation of microcredentials.
7. Develop a template for programs to assess their microcredentials.
8. Embed microcredentialing as an option in new program development materials.
9. Track students who earn microcredentials to determine impact on degree attainment.
10. Monitor the ongoing development of microcredentials across UWM.

In producing this report, the MWG drew on exemplars from the SUNY System and SUNY-Buffalo. SUNY is the national leader in for-credit microcredentialing, and UWM is benefiting from the three years that they devoted to microcredential policy and design work. SUNY resources are listed in the following sections.

**UWM Credit-Bearing Microcredentials: Guiding Principles**

Academically rigorous microcredentials promise advantages for students, programs and the wider community. Based on the experiences of other national early adopters, UWM expects microcredentials to retain existing students by motivating them to complete their degrees, satisfy industry demand for specialized training and workforce development, specify how students can contribute to their communities, make cultural competencies more visible and valuable, and give more people more opportunities for lifelong learning. The following principles will guide the design and implementation of new microcredentials at UWM.

1. Academic quality is paramount for microcredentials.

2. Microcredentials are developed through established faculty governance processes**.**

3. Microcredentials are initiated locally, developed, and approved according to local campus policies and procedures, consistent with campus mission and strategic goals.

4. Microcredentials designed to meet market and community needs should be informed by current data from appropriate contexts and align with relevant standards whenever possible.

5. Microcredentials can provide opportunities for industry/community/education connections and partnerships.

6. Stackable microcredentials are highly encouraged (multiple microcredentials lead to credit bearing coursework, a more advanced badge or a registered certificate or degree).

7. Microcredentials can be a complement to traditional credentials (certificate, diploma, degree or post-graduate certificate) or stand alone.

8. Microcredentials are secure, trackable, portable beyond the institution, and competency is documented in students' academic records.

*Modified from SUNY (https://system.suny.edu/academic-affairs/microcredentials/)

**Taxonomy of Terms***

The following list provides the UWM community with a common taxonomy around microcredentials, building on the quality work of the Lumina Foundation and others.[1]

**Badge**: use of digital technologies to represent competencies and various learning achievements; electronic badges should include meta-data on the evidence of learning and link back to sponsoring institution and evaluation criteria.

**Certificate**: a credential issued by an institution in recognition of the completion of a curriculum that usually represents a smaller domain of knowledge than established degrees. Credit bearing certificates must be approved through UWM curricular governance processes. Certificates typically contain fewer credits than a degree program.

**Certification**: mastery of or competency in specific knowledge, skills or processes that can be measured against a set of accepted standards, usually established by a recognized entity such as Wisconsin's Department of Public Instruction in the case of licensure requirements or an industry organization such as Microsoft.

**Cluster:** a focused development of a competency across multiple courses, ranging from 3 to 12 credits in length (e.g., a 3-credit cluster would be made up of three 1-credit courses; a 12-credit cluster could be made up of four 3-credit courses). A microcredential can be comprised of one or more clusters.

**Competency**: Learnable, measurable and/or observable knowledge and skill-sets gained.

**Degree**: title given by an institution (usually a college or university) that has been granted the authority by a state, a recognized Native American tribe, or the federal government to confer such credentials. A degree represents satisfactory accomplishments within an accepted body of knowledge.

**Microcredential:** Credentials that are generally smaller than a minor, certificate or degree and narrower in focus. For example, a microcredential could be three courses in length (9 credits). Microcredentials are designed to help students meet academic and career goals and to help them stand-out in a competitive job market. They are intentionally explicit about skills and competencies mastered.

**Stackable Credential**: part of a sequence of credentials that can be accumulated over time to build up an individual's qualifications and help that individual move along a career pathway and further education. For example, a 30-credit master's degree could be comprised of three 9-credit microcredentials plus a capstone course.

**Transparency**: easy to understand and compare, clear learning outcomes and/or competencies.

*[1] All definitions are based on Lumina/Connecting Credentials, save certificate (New York State Education Department); and MOOC (Educause)*

*Modified from SUNY (https://system.suny.edu/academic-affairs/microcredentials/definitions/ and https://az659834.vo.msecnd.net/eventsairsthcusprod/production-sunycpd-public/194d076e93b04c7ab929b8cd00ac4d6f )

**Draft Microcredentialing Policy**

# Microcredentialing
# Policies and Procedures

## Definition

A microcredential is a small program of study that provides specified competencies that contribute to the needs of communities, industries and students. Those that bear credit are smaller than degrees, majors, minors, certificates, concentrations, and other such credentials, often in the range of 6-12 credits. These are termed "clusters." When students fulfill the requirements for a cluster it will be noted on their transcript and they will receive an electronic badge.

## Governance Approval Process

Credit-bearing clusters are considered "submajors" for the purposes of Academic Approval Matrix, and must be approved by the appropriate governance process for undergraduate and graduate submajors. Interdisciplinary clusters can combine courses from multiple departments or programs, but one sponsoring unit must be designated as the administrative and governance home.

Academic Affairs (for undergraduates) and the Graduate School (for graduate students) may develop standardized procedures for proposing new clusters or revising clusters, such as online forms to expedite the process and facilitate preliminary review. Programs and departments are strongly urged to consult campus experts on microcredentials before beginning the proposal process.

## Credit Requirements

A cluster consists of 6-12 credits earned in two or more different courses.

A cluster must be earned either at the undergraduate or graduate level. An undergraduate cluster may include credit earned at the graduate level, but a graduate cluster must only include graduate-level courses. Note that graduate credit earned by undergraduates can only transfer into subsequent graduate degrees under limited circumstances. Credit for clusters also may be earned through the prior learning assessment (PLA) process according to the Prior Learning Assessment Policy.

No more than 3 credits of independent study shall be included in any microcredential.

## Admission to Clusters

Undergraduate and graduate students pursuing degrees or certificates at UWM will earn badges for completed clusters without an application process. All students are encouraged to consult their advisors in advance of beginning to work toward a cluster.

Programs may propose additional admissions requirements for some clusters, such as course pre-requisites or prior fieldwork experience.

Students who intend to pursue a cluster but are not already UWM students must apply to UWM as non-degree students (undergraduates and graduates) in order to enroll. Minimum university and program-level admissions requirements apply. Some clusters may have additional admissions requirements.

**Transfer of Credit**
At the graduate level, all credit included in credit-bearing microcredentials must be earned at UWM. Credit cannot be transferred in to a microcredential from another university. At the Undergraduate level, one course is permitted to transfer in if an equivalency is determined by the sponsoring unit. Note that credit from an earned UWM degree or certificate can be applied, where relevant, to a related microcredential.

**Articulations between Microcredentials and other Programs**
Clusters can be combined in an unlimited way with degree or certificate programs, and with majors and minors. For example, a 30-credit master's degree might include three different 9-credit clusters.

Clusters can double-count credit with other clusters without limit, as long as each cluster differs from another. It is desirable that distinct microcredentials be clearly distinct in content (generally should differ by at least 50%)

A course that is already being double counted between a certificate and a master's degree, a bachelor's and a master's degree, or between two certificates, can also be counted toward a cluster.

Unlike courses counted toward completed degrees, courses counted toward completed clusters remain eligible to be counted toward a later certificate or degree. All other restrictions on transfer of credit between degrees apply.

**Minimum Grade and GPA Requirements**
Because clusters are demonstrations of competency in a specific area, undergraduates must earn a C or higher (not C-) in all courses that count toward the cluster; graduate students must earn a B or higher (not B-) in all courses that count toward the cluster.

Students who cannot graduate with their degree because their overall GPA is below the undergraduate minimum of 2.0 or the graduate minimum of 3.0 can earn badges for completed clusters, provided they earned the minimum grade or higher in all course counted toward the cluster.

**Program Responsibilities**
Sponsoring units of the clusters should create advising procedures to ensure that students pursuing clusters do so in the most efficient way possible. Programs must ensure that courses are offered with enough regularity that students can complete them within the time limits.

Syllabi for courses included in clusters should include standard language to help students understand:

> "This course can be taken toward completion of the "X" cluster (add link). To learn more about the "X" cluster, contact me or your advisor. For more information see the Microcredential website (add link). Also see [add link to the Microcredential webpage] for information on how to 1) apply to add a completed cluster to your transcript and 2) receive a badge that recognizes your attainment of the competencies associated with this cluster.").

**Time Limits**
Students combining a cluster with a certificate or degree program must complete all clusters within the time-limit specified for the certificate or degree.

Non-degree students at the undergraduate and graduate level must complete each cluster within three years of taking the first course included in the cluster.

**Awarding of Microcredentials**
When students complete the credit requirements for a cluster, they must apply to have the badge awarded and the designation added to their transcript through procedures designed and publicized by the undergraduate and graduate registrars.

**Policy - Proposal Requirements for New Microcredentials delegated to the units**

1. Microcredential name
2. Brief description of the microcredential, including the competency it confers
3. Timeline for implementation (first semester of availability)
4. Time to completion
5. Undergraduate or Graduate
6. Identification of eligibility: 1) current UWM students in degree or certificate programs; 2) non-degree or special students enrolling at UWM solely for a credit-bearing microcredential
7. Additional admissions or eligibility requirements for:
    a. UWM students already enrolled in another degree or certificate (such as minimum UWM GPA)
    b. Non-degree or special students enrolling in credit-bearing microcredentials (such as prior educational attainment, prior GPA)
8. List of required courses and eligible elective courses to complete the cluster
9. Statement of educational or career opportunities that the microcredential will support.

10. Identification of Career Readiness skills that the Cluster will provide, as defined by the National Association of Colleges and Employers
    a. Career and Self-Development
    b. Communication
    c. Critical Thinking
    d. Equity and Inclusion
    e. Leadership
    f. Professionalism
    g. Teamwork
    h. Technology
11. Statement of whether the microcredential satisfies any accreditation or professional licensure requirements.
12. Name, position, and email of the person responsible for answering questions from prospective students about the microcredential, for admitting students to it, and for advising those admitted.
13. Names and emails of current staff or faculty responsible for website updates and overseeing the governance approval process.

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## Appendix. Microcredentialing Use Cases

### Introduction

A "use case" is a description of a typical pattern of use for a tool or service. In software user interface design, the best practice is to have the following elements:

- The *users*, which in our case is students who might take one or more course clusters at UWM. Users are represented by *personas*, which are fictional descriptions of archetypal users. Personas often rely on stereotypes drawn from popular culture. This helps convey the user's personality, cultural background, and place in the world by evoking widely held models of people. It can also make the use case more interesting or compelling. But it can also be misleading and culturally insensitive. Therefore, the following are rather thin persona descriptions that avoid these problems.
- Use case generally have descriptive *names*. This simply makes it easier to refer to them in discussions.
- A use case will have a description, which is usually composed of the user's *objective or goal* and a description of the actions or steps taken by the user and any responses that the user gets.

### Computer Science and Business Use Cases

*Case 1: Preparing for an Internship*
XXX is a sophomore Computer Science major who transferred to UWM. They took a first programming course at their previous college and are now in the 2nd course of UWM's three-course programming sequence. The CS program has broken its major into a collection of clusters. One cluster is "Programming Introduction" composed of CompSci 250 and 251. But XXX transferred in credits for 250 and can't get the badge for this cluster, which is irritating and hard for XXX to understand. However, after attending the CEAS Career Expo, XXX has learned that several companies prefer their interns to have completed the "Software Development" cluster (CompSci 351 and 360) before hiring them. XXX has been scared of taking CompSci 351, which has a reputation of having a brutal workload. But the chance to get a paying internship soon motivates XXX to sign up for both 351 and 360 in the next term.

*Case 2: Undergraduate Engineering Major*
Terry is a Sophomore who is early in his Engineering major who aims to go on to a career in the games industry. Knowing that employers appreciate some background in understanding, designing for, and managing game communities, he hears about a Game Studies & Design cluster at UWM, which calls for 9 credits of courses, choosing three of four: Games & Society (Anthro/DAC 140), Game Culture (English 293), Cultures of Online Games (Anthro 340), and Digital Media Workshop: Coding for Game Engines (Art 327). Terry can see how fitting these three courses into his plan of study is manageable, and he appreciates that they can point prospective employers to something more concrete and coherent than just the individual

courses. Lastly, the microcredential is offered by the Digital Arts & Culture (DAC) Program at UWM and fulfilling it would also count toward the DAC Certificate, with just a few more courses.

*Case 2: Graduate-level Professional Development*
YYY is working for a Milwaukee-area industrial firm. YYY has an MBA from UWM in the area of Marketing, but is a bit burnt-out with their current portfolio of tasks. There are new positions opening up related to Marketing, but the company is focusing on new hires who have training in Data Science. YYY approaches their manager to ask if they could get such a position and is told that the company might pay for training if it involved coursework for credit with rigorous standards. So, YYY looks at UWM, Marquette, and MSOE. Both UWM and Marquette have short microcredentials in Business Analytics that use data science techniques. However, the offered company support is only partial and UWM's lower tuition makes it more attractive. So, YYY starts UWM's 9-credit Business Analytics cluster.

**Social Sciences Use Cases**

*Case 1: Working Professional in the Museum Industry*
Tim works at a large, private museum in the Milwaukee area, in their public relations department. His undergraduate background, as well as ten years of his career, are in journalism, and those skills serve him well in his current position, but he has noticed that there is a lot about how museums operate that is distinct, and he believes that additional professional training in museums could help him advance his career. The standard professional credential in museums, a graduate certificate, is more of a commitment than he can manage, but 6 graduate credits (two courses) as a special student sounds manageable in scope as well as workable with his schedule. UWM's Museum Studies Program offers this opportunity through the Museum Professionalism cluster, and the required courses are Museum Fundamentals (Anthro 620) and Administration and Organization of Museums (Anthro 721). The cluster would count toward partial fulfillment of the graduate certificate, should Tim decide to pursue it in the future.

*Case 2: Graduate in Social Work*
Onisha is pursuing her master's in social work, and she has come to feel passionate about how deep understandings of the community contexts in which social work takes place enable better interventions and coordination with local institutions and leaders. In several of her courses she encountered ethnographic research put to this kind of valuable use, and she learns that UWM offers a graduate 6-credit microcredential in Ethnographic Research. Those pursuing the cluster choose two of three courses, based on their interests and goals. The courses cover how to read ethnographic work critically (Ethnography and Cultural Processes – Anthro 349), how to plan, conduct, and write-up elementary ethnographic research projects (Introduction to Research Methods – Anthro 560), as well as some advanced considerations for ethnographic researchers (Techniques and Problems in Ethnography – Anthro 561). While her program is demanding of her credits and time, fitting in two of these courses is manageable, and will help fuel both her

own graduate work in her discipline as well as provide her lifelong competencies in her professional life.

**Humanities Use Cases**

*Case 1: Undergraduate Creative Writing Major*
Pat is a junior majoring in Creative Writing in the English Department. Like most humanities majors, the student and the student's parents are convinced of the value of a liberal arts education, and aware that those students do well long-term in a wide range of careers. Still, as graduation nears Pat and Pat's parents both find themselves with more questions about what the first career steps out of college might be. They agree that it might be best to earn some additional credential beyond Pat's intended minor in Spanish, something that might open doors to a first job. With significant electives left, Pat begins earning credit toward a 9-credit microcredential "cluster" in Writing for Organizations, which involves a course in literary publishing that satisfies a Creative Writing requirement, a course in Professional Writing on grant writing, and a course from Communications on Communication in Organizations. They feel reassured that this will appear on the transcript and can be touted in resumes and cover letters.

*Case 2: Non-Degree Graduate Student in Digital Cultures*
Corey is a middle-aged adult working in Information Technology with a child graduating from college soon. The job is technical, but Corey has always been interested in a wide range of digital media: social media, video games, and big data projects. None of these were taught academically when Corey was in college, and none have a huge payoff for Corey's current job now, but after a couple decades in the field Corey is eager to explore other options and finally has some time to do so. Still, a master's degree in Media, Cinema and Digital Studies seems like too much, and Corey worries about having been away from the classroom for so long. Corey decides to "test the waters" by starting a 9-credit microcredential Cluster in Gaming Culture as a non-degree student, which includes enough electives that it can be steered toward Corey's more technical interests. Because the Cluster can be completed over three years, Corey can dip in and out of the classroom as relevant courses appear on the schedule. If Corey decides to apply to a degree program later, current faculty will be able to write recommendations and the credit from the Cluster will be able to transfer.

*Case 3: Master's Student in Philosophy*
Chris is in the fall semester of the first year in the Philosophy MA, a very strong program that provides graduates for top PhD programs nationwide. But Chris is unsure about continuing on the academic track and has elected to do the non-thesis option and explore other careers, such as academic administration or non-profit work. This leaves Chris with 9 credits of electives, all of which must be in "related fields" to philosophy. Because Chris has longstanding interests in gender equality and some experience volunteering for community organizations serving women and LGBTQ+ youth, a 9-credit Cluster in Gender Theory makes sense. This includes Philos 535G, Philosophical Topics in Feminist Theory, and two additional theoretical courses

from Women's and Gender Studies. Chris hopes this will help get a foot in the door with organizations or offices that do similar kinds of work.

*Case 4: Doctoral Student in History*

Avery is a second-year year doctoral student in History, working on the early civil rights movement in the Midwest. Avery expects to do a lot of archival research on neglected figures from the movement, but also has become extremely well-versed in equity issues and the history and theory of race more generally. Course electives on African American history, folklore, and race theory have rounded out more specific historical preparation. Because the History department advises students about the challenging state of the academic job market, Avery knows not to pin all hopes on an academic teaching job. Avery fully intends to finish the PhD, but also understands that non-academic employers tend to interpret the PhD as evidence of knowledge rather than of ability. In consulting with the program's master's advisor, Avery realizes that previously earned credit is already halfway toward completing a 12-credit microcredential cluster in Cultural Competence. With just two more courses that might draw on social science methods from Sociology and Anthropology, Avery can communicate an ability to navigate the cultural complexities of race in the United States. That ability is valued in marketing, government, non-profits, and any large organization attempting to diversify.