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## How to Choose a Microcredential

These educational credentials, offered for credit or not for credit, may include certificates, badges or boot camps.

By [Sarah Wood](#) | March 20, 2024 |



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Microcredentials have boomed in popularity but its worth asking a few questions before pursuing the program that's right for you.

Microcredentials – sometimes referred to as non-degree or short-term credentials – have grown in popularity, raising many questions about their worth.

In the U.S., the public has more familiarity with [degrees](#) than short-term credentials, says Marni Baker Stein, chief content officer at Coursera, an open online course provider.

"There's a lot of information about short-form credentials out there on the internet that people can search for," she says. "But one has to really make sure that you are reaching out to a trusted source because there's so much misinformation out there around certificates and their value."

Here's what to consider before pursuing these credentials.

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## What Are Microcredentials?

The definition of microcredentials isn't always clear, experts say. Generally, they are offered by schools, education companies and professional organizations and may be for credit or not for credit.

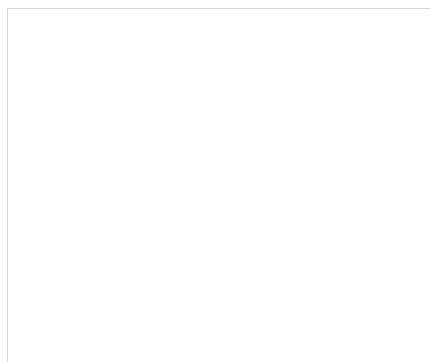
A microcredential "can be part of a degree program, like a stepping stone or a milestone within a degree program, or it can be completely untethered from what we consider academic credit courses or degree-seeking behavior," says Julie Uranis, senior vice president of online and strategic initiatives at UPCEA, an online and professional education association based in Washington, D.C.

There are different types of microcredentials, such as certificates, badges and [boot camps](#), which can take as little as a few months to complete. These microcredentials are sometimes "stacked" by learners who choose to obtain more than one in order to develop a specified skill set.

## How Do Employers View Microcredentials?

Opinions and data vary on whether microcredentials are worth it, with skepticism coming from some employers.

According to a 2023 UPCEA [report](#) – which surveyed individuals responsible for the hiring, training or development of other employees – 69% of respondents were extremely or very familiar with nondegree credentials. Some employers recognize a few of the benefits of microcredentials, such as added practical and real-world experience, specialized skills and improved soft skills.



But when a microcredential appears on a job candidate's resume, 46% of survey respondents were unsure about the quality of education, and 42% were unsure about the competencies and skills acquired.

However, more than 7 in 10 respondents agreed or strongly agreed that nondegree or alternative credentials have helped their organization fill skills gaps and are

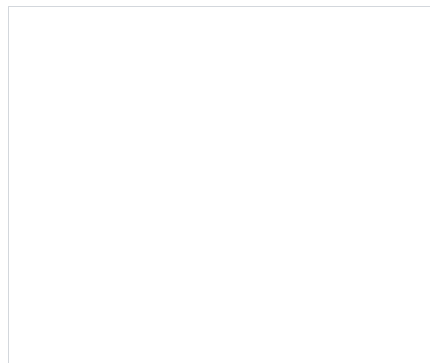
helping to improve the quality of the workforce, per the UPCEA report.

Comparably, a 2023 Coursera [survey](#) – which included responses from nearly 5,000 students and employers across 11 countries – found that among U.S. employers, 86% agreed that earning an industry microcredential strengthens a candidate's job application, and 39% have hired at least one candidate with a microcredential.

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These microcredentials, like some degrees, don't always translate to higher salaries. For instance, across 30 states, Washington, D.C., and Puerto Rico, there were recent declines in the share of residents who have industry certifications and college certificates with significant wage premiums, according to a recent Lumina Foundation [report](#). In this case, wage premiums occur if an individual earns at least 10% to 15% more than a job that requires only a [high school diploma](#).

"It's been kind of a complicated space because many employers are even in the business of offering microcredentials themselves," says Shalin Jyotishi, senior adviser for education, labor and the future of work at New America, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit think tank. "Google offers certificate programs. IBM offers a number of microcredentials. Amazon offers industry certifications and IT. It can often be a bit muddy, I think, for consumers who see these mixed messages."



However, some experts say that short-term credentials are a great way to jumpstart a career or college journey.

"Many students may not be ready or maybe their financial position wouldn't permit them to jump straight into a degree program. Short-term credentials can be a great way to sort of gain some short-term training to meet short-term needs. But generally, students are going to need continuing education to move up in their careers," Jyotishi says.

He adds that "consumers should know that short-term credentials – the landscape is a landmine as opposed to a ladder to mobility. There's definitely value in microcredentials. They are useful. But they need to be designed in a quality way."

## What to Consider Before Selecting a Microcredential

### Understand Your Career Goals

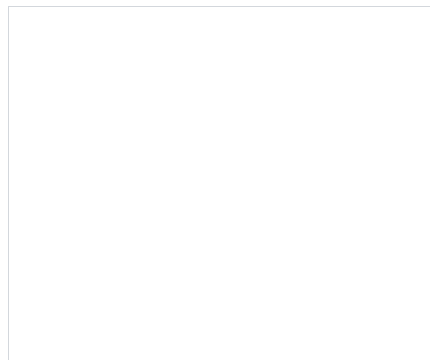
Before committing to completing a microcredential, learners need to evaluate their career goals, Baker Stein says.

"They need to understand if that career or that job role is available in the place

where they live or the places they want to go," she says. "Based on that, they can then decide, 'What's best for me to attain that job or to get started on that career path? Is that something for which I need specific skills that can be earned through a certificate? Or is that something for which I would really need to have a degree? Or is that something that requires both?'"

### Do Your Research

Jyotishi advises students to look for signs that an employer was involved with the credential, such as interview guarantees, opportunities to access work-based learning opportunities or [internships](#). For instance, [Mesa Community College](#) in Arizona and Boeing partnered in 2019 to create a for-credit boot camp, which included 36 hours of in-classroom instruction. Students who complete the program and pass a background check are invited to an on-site interview.



According to the UPCEA report, 44% of respondents reported that their organization has never been approached by an institution to develop nondegree or alternative credentials, compared with 40% that were. However, the majority – 68% – are willing to work with [colleges](#) and universities to develop these credentials.

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"Short-term credential programs can be great at meeting customized training needs of employers," Jyotishi says. "But if employers are not involved with the development of those programs, that can be a sign of concern."

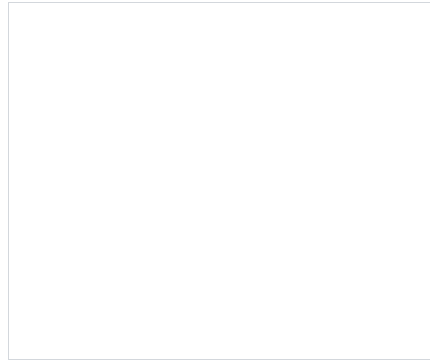
Uranis recommends looking for reviews or testimonials, as well as seeing if certain microcredentials are mentioned in job postings.

"If you're interested in a particular position and you see time and time again that you need to be a certified project manager, then that's a pretty good bet that that's valued in the industry by that employer," she says. "And it's something that you should consider if you want to move into that line of work or you maybe want to grow in your career. It's really thinking through and doing a little bit of homework on what credentials exist in your area."

The value of a microcredential may also depend on the industry, Uranis adds.

### Look for Red Flags

If a student has never heard of the organization offering the credential, or if there's limited information available, that could be a red flag. Per the Coursera survey, 61% of respondents rank whether a microcredential comes from an industry-leading company as the most important quality indicator.

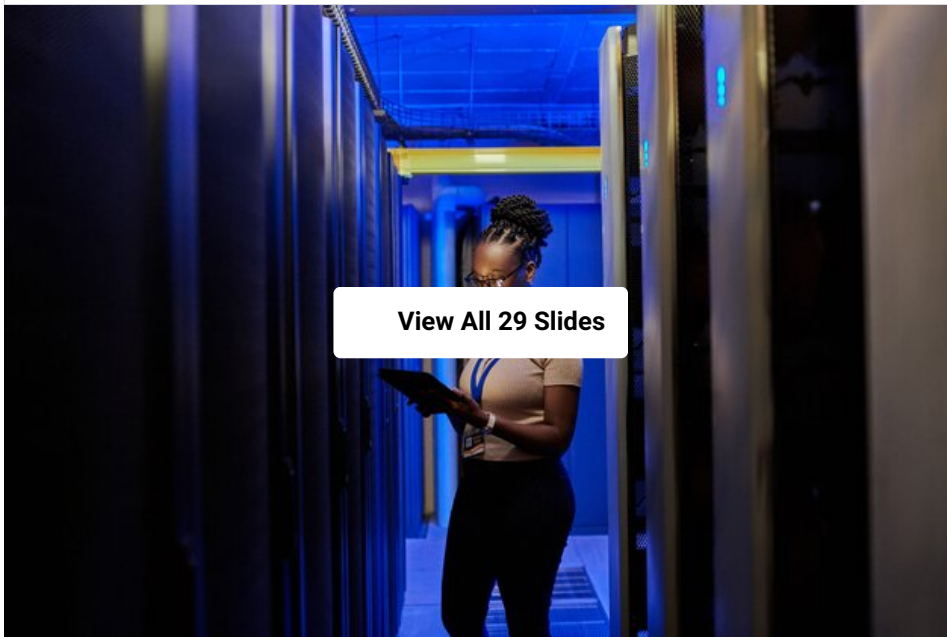


Additional warning signs to look out for are the duration of the program and an overpromise in results, such as a major salary boost or endless job options. Uranis also advises learners to look for external validation, like how universities have [accreditation](#).

"Folks should trust their gut," she says. "Just like everything else, if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is."

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