

Using Stackable Certificates to Grow Adult Learning Pathways

Strategic Plan Theme: Student Success

Funding Level: Below \$1 million

Facility Needs: No new facilities will be needed

Submitting Unit: Broad

Collaborating colleges/departments/units involved with this proposal.

College of Veterinary Medicine, Hub for Innovation in Learning and Technology, Eli Broad College of Business, College of Education College of Agricultural Natural Resources, College of Social Science, College of Communication Arts and Sciences

What is the proposal's big theme or idea?

Create Academic Policy for Stackable Certificates

What is the proposal's goal?

Create academic policy for stackable, transcriptable certificates within graduate degree programs. To be precise, we define stackable certificates as: sub-modules to a more comprehensive degree; e.g. an MS/MA. Using credit-bearing modules from a graduate program, such certificates—by construction—must themselves be approved through governance and consist of approved courses. MS/MA programs, themselves, are either a collection of courses (Plan B programs), or a collection of courses accompanied by a thesis (Plan A programs).

Our focus is on Plan B programs, as there is nothing to distinguish a student who was admitted to a Plan B program and completed the requisite coursework from a student who enrolled in a few certificates mirroring the same requisite coursework (most professional programs at MSU are Plan B). The only difference between learners in these two circumstances are the mental frameworks employed by the learners, and the university.

Ideally a stackable MA/MS degree at MSU might look like this: • Certificate A (3 courses @ 3 credits, containing 1 foundational and 2 topical courses) • Certificate B (3 courses @ 3 credits, containing 1 foundational and 2 topical courses) • Certificate C (3 courses @ 3 credits, containing 1 foundational and 2 topical courses) • Capstone experience following the three certificates. (Allows the student to demonstrate integration of knowledge across the curriculum). • Regardless of time elapsed between the completion of each certificate, completion of the capstone and the Type B milestone assessment within, converts the certificate credits to an MA/MS degree. • Alternatively, other programs are best served with foundational “required” courses at the starting point, followed by multiple “tracks” available for the two subsequent certificates. In all cases, the structure of these stackable certificates should mirror the curriculum of the associated degree.

While we would welcome a new classification of certificates at MSU, we can already move the needle within our extant framework with a handful of light policy modifications, including:

- 1) Allow Type II & III certificates more flexibility in the number of credits (more or fewer than 9 credits).
- 2) Allow more than 9 credits to be transferred from Type III certificates towards an MS or MA degree when courses taken are identical to those in the degree curriculum. Require each “block” of up to nine credits slot into a current type 1 or type 2 graduate certificate to meet this exception.
- 3) Allow greater time (e.g. 10-12 years) to complete an MA/MS degree when composed of courses residing in transcriptable certificates.

- 4) Reduce barriers, such as multiple applications and fees at MSU when going from one certificate to another, or from one certificate towards an MS or MA (e.g. fee waivers, streamlined admissions processes for those who already have at least one certificate from the relevant program, etc.).

Define the significance, or impact of your big idea.

There are opportunities for MSU to meet the needs of a broader set of community members in service of professional learning, and the emphasis therein is largely on graduate certificates. This focus, is itself, an acknowledgement of the differences between our traditional residential learners in full-time, four-to-six year programs, and their professional counterparts in the rest of the world: the National Center for Education Statistics documented in 2016 that “roughly one out of four adults has a non-degree credential — a postsecondary certificate, a certification, or a license.” Furthermore, emerging from the coronavirus pandemic 63% of Americans surveyed sought either skills training or a non-degree certificate, rather than an associates, bachelors, or master’s degree. Serving this pool (63% of 230 million) of adults residing in the United States is what our proposals intend to unlock.

Who will be impacted?

Professional learners shoulder adult responsibilities, and the fact that MS/MA degrees require substantial contiguous commitment can be incredibly off-putting to adults interested in furthering their education. Although there are ample pathways for students to temporarily step outside of an MS/MA program at little to no cost to the learner, doing so runs counter to the traditional academic ladders that we were all trained in, and now proffer ourselves. Simply put, without being explicit about these pathways, they remain largely unknown to those outside of our university; i.e. the very individuals we seek to educate.

By explicitly pacing an adult’s learning path—celebrating their progress and adding value for the learner with the granting of certificates along the way—we help professional learners overcome the real and perceived hurdles keeping them on the sidelines today. Putting 10 connected courses in one large box called an MS/MA is no different than boxing the same collection of courses in smaller batches under the guise of professional certificates—the skills, knowledge acquired, and assessments are the same. The main difference is that the latter is designed for today’s adult learner.

What does sustainability for your proposal look like?

When well-managed, MSU has shown that professional certificate and masters programs offered online can maintain the same quality as previously on-ground programs. By removing geographic limitations, a program can often attract larger numbers of high-quality students. When appropriately priced, these programs can keep net-positive revenue flows as they grow to meet demand. We ought to begin building many more certificate programs in areas that are complimentary to graduate degrees that we currently offer (or plan to offer), but the most compelling reason for doing so is not our immediate self-interest, but rather a reaffirmation of our founding principles: disseminating practical knowledge at scale.

The revenue generated by attracting a larger audience of profession-oriented graduate students would directly sustain the efforts associated with supporting them and designing new modularity into existing curricular structures. Many of these programs already do, or likely would consider, hiring adjunct instructors with practical experience in the field. These contingent appointments, coupled with productive researchers from our tenure system faculty, provide an extremely attractive combination of expertise and experience to mid-career learners.

Expanding the capacity of our programs with certificate-driven demand is sustainable because the unit cost of instruction is well within the margin of the increased enrollment. Furthermore, we significantly extend the network and reach of the institution through these students, their employers, the adjuncts instructors and their employers, creating virtuous patterns beneficial to our reputational strength as a source of expertise in fields associated with these modular certificates and degrees. In the long run this also indirectly benefits our fundraising and sponsored research revenue sources.