

AP.8 - Rationale

George Mason University has been offering various forms of non-degree credentials, including digital badges, micro-credentials, and stackable certificates, for several years through academic units and the Office of Continuing and Professional Education. AP.8 formalizes these existing practices into a comprehensive institutional policy that ensures compliance with SACSCOC accreditation standards and SCHEV guidance, both of which require institutions to establish clear governance structures, transparent student information, and quality assurance processes for all credential types.

This policy provides necessary clarity by distinguishing between credit-bearing credentials (which are subject to full accreditation standards and appear on transcripts) and noncredit credentials (which are issued as digital badges). It establishes faculty qualifications and assessment requirements appropriate to each credential type, clarifies approval pathways through program, college, and university governance, and defines roles and responsibilities across academic units, CPE, the Provost's Office, and the Registrar. AP.8 is intended to position the university to continue expanding these focused learning pathways as opportunity permits, while maintaining academic quality and accountability.

AP.8 Non-Degree Academic Credentials

Policy Scope

This policy governs credit-bearing and noncredit academic credentials developed and awarded by George Mason University academic units and/or Office of Continuing and Professional Education (CPE). It does not apply to degrees, minors, concentrations, or academic certificates governed under AP.5 and AP.6.

Definition

Non-degree conferring credentials (NDCs) are awarded for completing academic programs that teach focused knowledge or skills competencies. These credentials comprise more than a single course but less content than a full degree; credentials may be composed of for-credit or not-for-credit classes and structured learning experiences. The academic quality standards for non-degree credentials align with George Mason's standards for other institutional credentials, with rigor appropriate to each credential type and purpose, as defined in this policy.

AP.8.1 Categories of Non-Degree Credentials

George Mason University offers NDCs in two categories: credit-bearing and non-credit. All approved credentials must clearly publish eligibility requirements, completion criteria, credit/noncredit status, transcript eligibility, stackable pathways, and whether credits may transfer to other institutions in program materials and institutional registries per accreditation transparency requirements.

AP.8.1.1 Credit-Bearing Academic Credentials

Credit-bearing credentials are earned upon the completion of specified university credit-bearing courses.

Credit Requirements: Credit-bearing credentials range from requiring 3 to 15 credits and must be completable in two semesters or less. Credentials must use a specified curriculum (not menu-style course options) within existing academic program discipline areas with available faculty resources and may not duplicate names of existing degree or certificate programs.

Approval: Proposals must be reviewed and approved through established curricular governance pathways at the program, college/school, and university levels. Credit-bearing credentials follow the same academic standards, assessment, SACSCOC accreditation standards, and quality assurance processes as traditional academic programs. Where applicable, credit-bearing credentials are subject to accreditation substantive change notification requirements.

Degree Applications and Transferability: Credits may count toward certificate or degree requirements only if approved as part of their published existing degree requirements and electives. If multiple credit-bearing credentials can be taken together and combined into a certificate or degree ("stackable credentials"), that information should be published, and advisors must be available to explain the process and procedures for using stackable credentials to complete a degree program. All time limits

and other relevant academic policies apply. Transfer of credit-bearing credentials to other institutions is subject to receiving institution policies.

Flexibility for Professional Requirements: Credentials required to align with specific professional licensure, certification, or industry standards may depart from standard parameters with documented justification and Dean approval.

AP.8.1.2 Noncredit Academic Credentials

Noncredit academic credentials document competency achievement or program completion, but do not earn academic credit. These credentials are not subject to SACSCOC substantive change requirements but must maintain published institutional policies regarding purpose, characteristics, and student rights. Academic credentials documenting competency achievement or program completion that do not carry academic credit and are not recorded on the university transcript.

Credential Types:

- Competency-Based Credentials: Competency-based credentials must require performance-based assessment demonstrating mastery of defined learning outcomes. Assessment evidence must be documented and retained per university guidelines.
- Program Completion Credentials: The program must document satisfactory participation or completion based on attendance and instructional hours but does not require direct competency assessment. Faculty and staff professional development credentials within George Mason may be issued for university training programs and follow the same noncredit credential requirements.

Approval: Proposals that originate in academic units require approval by the Dean of the college or school in which the LAU is housed. Proposals that originate in other units require approval of the Vice President/Provost of that unit. All noncredit academic credentials must be approved by the Continuing and Professional Education Office. Credentials must meet George Mason's standards for skill development and learning outcomes, assessment appropriate to the credential type, and industry or professional alignment.

Issuance: All noncredit credentials are issued as digital badges through the university credentialing platform and include appropriate disclaimers indicating noncredit status and ineligibility for transcript notation.

Credit Conversion and Prior Learning: Noncredit credentials do not automatically convert to academic credit. Students may petition to apply documented learning from noncredit credentials (from George Mason or other institutions) toward academic credit through George Mason's prior learning assessment procedures, subject to faculty review and institutional credit limits. Acceptance of external noncredit credentials follows existing transfer credit policies.

AP.8.2 Academic Quality Standards

Outcomes: All credentials must focus on clearly defined, measurable skill development or learning outcomes with specific earning criteria documented through deliverables, assignments, or performance artifacts, aligned with academic, professional, or industry standards appropriate to the credential type.

Assessment: Credit-bearing credentials require performance-based (or competency-based) assessment meeting the same rigor as equivalent credit courses. Performance-based assessment requires students

to apply their knowledge and skills by solving real-world problems or creating, performing, or producing artifacts that demonstrate specific competencies in authentic contexts. Noncredit competency-based credentials require demonstrated mastery of defined outcomes, with assessment evidence documented and retained for quality review. Participation-based credentials document completion based on attendance and instructional hours and must specify completion criteria.

Faculty and Instructor Qualifications: Credit-bearing credentials must be taught by faculty meeting the same qualifications required for equivalent credit courses. Noncredit credential instructors must have documented qualifications appropriate to the subject matter.

Delivery Modality: All delivery formats (in-person, online, hybrid) must provide equivalent learning experiences with consistent outcomes and appropriate student support services.

Periodic Review: The office of the Provost conducts reviews of all credentials to assess compliance and continuation recommendations.

Student Appeals: Students enrolled in credit-bearing credentials may appeal assessment decisions or credential denial through existing academic grievance procedures to the Office of the Provost.

AP.8.3 Oversight and Compliance

Academic units hold primary responsibility for credit-bearing credentials and appoint a faculty lead to oversee program delivery and assessment. The Office of the Provost oversees compliance for all credential types. The Office of the University Registrar maintains official academic transcript records for credit-bearing credentials and verifies achievements and credential status.

Tuition and fees for credit-bearing credentials are assessed at the standard per-credit rate. Credit-bearing credentials may be eligible for financial aid subject to enrollment status and federal/state requirements; eligible programs are listed separately by the Office of Student Financial Aid. Noncredit credential fees are established by the sponsoring unit and approved by the Office of the Provost. Administrative fees for credentialing platform access and badge issuance are assessed per the university fee schedule.