

## **Transcript of Changing Higher Ed Podcast 154 with Host Dr. Drumm McNaughton and Guest Matt Frank**

### **The Value of Micro-Credentials for Higher Ed Institutions**

Welcome to Changing Higher Ed, a podcast dedicated to helping higher education leaders improve their institutions, with your host, Dr. Drumm McNaughton, CEO of the Change Leader, a consultancy that helps higher ed leaders holistically transform their institutions. Learn more at [changinghighered.com](https://changinghighered.com). And now, here's your host, Drumm McNaughton.

#### **Drumm McNaughton 00:31**

Thank you, David. Our guest today is Matt Frank, director of technology evangelism and product marketing at Blackthorn.io. Matt, a Denver resident and music enthusiast, has one goal in mind: to empower organizations with apps that delight in, simply put, just work. After years working for nonprofits and in higher ed, Matt became frustrated with the many disconnected legacy services that dominated those industries and fell backward into the world of SAS technology. This led him to the Salesforce ecosystem, where he's worked for multiple award-winning ISV partners that focus on nonprofits, NGOs, associations, and higher ed.

Along the way, Matt became an expert in microcredentials. Microcredentials have gained popularity recently, as organizations like the Strada Education Network report that, since 2020, the most popular option for American adults considering additional education or training is pursuing a certificate, certification, or license. And digital credentialing platforms such as Credly report that organizations issuing industry and workforce credentials are up 83% since the pandemic.

While microcredentials may not replace traditional higher ed programs, they're likely to persist as an increasingly important component of the educational landscape, particularly for learners seeking to upskill and rescale quickly in response to changing workforce demands. Matt joins us today to talk about micros and how they are and will continue to impact the education landscape and future learners. Matt, welcome to the show.

#### **Matt Frank 02:15**

Hey. Great to be here. Thanks for having me.

#### **Drumm McNaughton 02:17**

My pleasure. I'm really looking forward to this conversation about microcredentials. You're quite the expert.

#### **Matt Frank 02:25**

By accident, definitely.

**Drumm McNaughton 02:28**

Isn't that the way it is with so many different things? Who'd have thought I'd be doing podcasts and consulting in higher ed after flying airplanes in the Navy? But tell our audience a little bit about your background, and then how you got here.

**Matt Frank 02:44**

Yeah, absolutely. I started off in the education and nonprofit world X number of decades ago. I gradually moved my way through that, first starting in educational design, then moving slowly more and more into the software and technology space before flipping over that side of the table entirely. From the very beginning and throughout my career, there was always this sort of push and pull between what you can be certified to do, what you have the knowledge to do, and where you want to grow as an individual. There was always this increasing familiarity with the credentialing world that came with that.

So when I was working for nonprofits, a degree opened the doors. When I worked in education, a degree opened the doors. But when I started working in the software world about a decade ago, it really wasn't really about if I had a degree anymore. It was about what can you demonstrably show me that you can do? That's where I started to become familiar with the world of microcredentials. That's where I started to become familiar with the world of Salesforce and how the two blend together to enhance the world of education across the board.

**Drumm McNaughton 03:53**

That's really interesting. What's most interesting is you were able to date this back to about 10 years ago, which is when the perception of higher ed started dropping off. It's no longer, "Oh, you have to go back and get a college degree. It's the way to the middle class, etc." And you hit it on the head. It started really about 10 years ago.

**Matt Frank 04:21**

Yeah, it really did. Over the course of the last 10 years, I've worked with a number of developers, project managers, accountants, and people in any number of roles and fields who, much like me, are no longer using their undergraduate or graduate-level degrees. We're utilizing the tools and skills we've learned through continuing education programs, non-degree certificate programs, or credentialing programs because they're practical, and they're directly applicable to the rules that we have today.

Over the last 15 years or so since the Recession started, we've seen people really pivot in their careers. So the ability to go back to school for what you need, as opposed to what you're being prescribed, was an essential part of this transition. It's something that I really started to delve into when it became apparent.

**Drumm McNaughton 05:17**

Hence the rise of microcredentials and things along those lines. In manufacturing, you have just-in-time manufacturing. You get the parts there right before they're needed. Education is becoming that way as well with microcredentials and just-in-time education.

**Matt Frank 05:33**

Absolutely, it is. It helps employees be a little bit more nimble. And it helps employers invest in their employees so they can retain them a little bit longer and upskill them in ways that are meaningful to the business.

**Drumm McNaughton 05:49**

That's an interesting point about how employers want to upskill their employees to retain them. You don't see many institutions or many employers nowadays saying "Go out and get your college degree." This is a way for them to keep current with the skills they need.

**Matt Frank 06:10**

Oh, absolutely, I think you're always going to find those organizations, especially traditional corporate organizations, that are like, "Go get your MBA and we'll talk about your promotion path." But in the technology, manufacturing, and safety worlds, it's not that way anymore. It's, "Hey, go get trained up in X, Y, or Z." Or Zed if you have listeners in Europe and Australia. "Go scale up here. We'll help you with investing. There are all these organizations like Coursera that we can help you work with." Or, "If there's a program at a local university or school that you want to enroll in, we will help you with that, too." That makes the employment relationship stickier, which is really cool, especially when we talk about people starting and not finishing in their enrolled programs at universities or just about lower enrollment altogether. As we approach the segment on education as opposed to the traditional degree route, it really does make a difference.

**Drumm McNaughton 07:14**

It makes so much more sense in many respects. I remember when I got my undergraduate degree in physics and flew airplanes in the Navy, it was like, "Yeah, I could put that to use. It certainly helped me understand things." But they say that the undergraduate degree teaches you how to think. The Master's degree gives you specific skills. And the PhD is the research degree where you're bringing new knowledge into being. It makes sense. But, nowadays, how many folks can actually go from an undergraduate degree directly into a field of study that they majored in? It's very, very rare.

**Matt Frank 07:57**

I don't think there are a lot of full-time poetry or philosopher roles out there these days that people can be directly hired for. I'm not saying this to dig on those degrees. They're wonderful degrees. I took great creative writing, poetry, and philosophy courses that I still use and talk about to this day. But it's not what earns me a living as a professional. And it's certainly not what kept me in school when I was there, right?

My undergraduate degree was in interdisciplinary studies, which goes directly to the point of what you said. Undergraduate education teaches you how to think at the end of the day. That was the greatest benefit I got from that degree program. Shout out to Virginia Tech. Go, Hokies! But after I got out there, there's nobody hiring for an interdisciplinary studies major, right? There's nobody saying, "Oh, yeah, that's exactly what we need."

The joke I heard from a couple of my professors was, "Oh, this is a great degree for graduate school." But I needed to earn a living for graduate school. I didn't have the ability to afford to handle that on my own. So I started to look at what was out there in the world. And now there are about 40% of people who think that higher ed is worth it. That number gets smaller as you start to stratify to graduate-level versus undergraduate-level degrees.

For me, it was, what can I do practically to continue my education and use the skills I learned as an undergraduate while maintaining the ability to afford more than maybe Top Ramen to eat every night of the week? It's great as an 18 year old, but not so great as you get a little bit older. As I was moving forward in the world, I started to see—and I'm sure you've seen this in your research as well—that more and more employers aren't requiring a degree for employment anymore. So I started to look back at what I had earned and looked forward at where I wanted to go and started to wonder, is this traditional route the best way forward for my career progression?

**Drumm McNaughton** 10:12

So let's get into the microcredentials. Right now, there are over a million of these out there. It's like, "Okay, where's the value? What are they, etc? So, take us through microcredentials. What are they and why are they important?"

**Matt Frank** 10:27

Oh my god. I love microcredentials! First off, let's start with a few definitions. So you may not know microcredentials as microcredentials, right? The term in your common vernacular could be badges. It could be non-degree certificates. It could be stack certifications. There is any number of ways to describe them. But, ultimately, what it comes down to is they are non-diploma programs that certify you with practical knowledge and skills and provide progressive value to you as an individual in the labor market.

They can be described using four main principles. They provide flexibility. This allows learners to acquire specific skills or knowledge efficiently that can be promoted to professional organizations with popular options for retaining or rescaling people. There's the industry alignment part of microcredentials. That's super important. They can effectively align with industry organizations. They can align with new technologies that are coming out in the market. Or they can help describe a partnership between, for example, a university and an industry at large. Then there's personalization. Microcredentials allow you to create the learning journey that you want. There's also the technology portion to this that goes back to industry alignment. It allows you to easily design and manage what services you're going to be able to provide through technology, which is the largest growing area in the professional world today. So ultimately, they come back as a four-pronged path towards professional growth outside of the traditional degree program. They can be sponsored by associations, professional organizations, public and private industry partnerships, or even traditional universities.

**Drumm McNaughton** 12:34

Let's unpack each of those just a little bit, starting with the first one.

**Matt Frank** 12:39

At the end of the day, it's about flexibility on a lot of fronts when you enroll in a traditional four-year undergraduate degree program or a two- to three-year graduate program. If you're going full time, you have to dedicate your life to that program, to a degree. People make it work, where they're working and learning at the same time. There's a number of options with that. But with micro-degree or microcredential programs, what you're doing is saying, "I'm working and I'm learning, and both of them are equally as important when it comes to my time and schedule." Going with a micro-degree or microcredential program also means that you can

work with your employer to show them the progress you're making with that certificate program in real time. This allows them to make flexible accommodations when capable to accommodate your progress as a learner, which ultimately benefits them as an employer.

**Drumm McNaughton** 13:37

That makes sense. Especially in today's job market, we don't necessarily get the opportunity to step back for a year or two to go get a graduate degree, especially in areas such as technology, which is rapidly changing. You're much better off getting a credential on how to program in a particular language, etc.

**Matt Frank** 14:04

Yeah, absolutely. Technology works on both sides of the fence when we're talking about microcredentials. It allows employers to upskill or rescale employees and allows employees to have new skills to advance their careers. But technology is also changing the landscape of how these microcredentials are purchased or acquired and how they are then utilized and maintained as well. There's a number of platforms that can be tied into employee resource and HR programs so that organizations can track who is keeping up to date. Heck, even organizations like Salesforce have started to use this internally with their Trailhead functionality, which is great. It's open to the public. It's open to employees. And you can see in real time who's learning and progressing, and you can keep that on track for part of your personal and professional learning programs.

**Drumm McNaughton** 15:05

So it's flexible. It's aligned with what industry needs. It's personalized. And it's highly focused on technology.

**Matt Frank** 15:14

Generally speaking. There are certainly certificate programs that are not technology focused. You can see that in the medical and healthcare fields. You can see it in certain accounting principles as well. But, by and large, the technology world has embraced this more rapidly than other industries. That's due to the propensity for experimentation that comes with technology that may not be there in other worlds.

**Drumm McNaughton** 15:41

The other thing, too, is, technology is changing so rapidly. How do folks keep current on what's going on? I've known only one university that's been able to figure this one out. They have their Master's program with a core faculty team teaching the baseline courses and then adjuncts who teach exactly what's going on in Silicon Valley. That is one model. But even to get your Master's in technology, or whatever it is, that's a two-year schlep.

**Matt Frank** 16:16

Yeah, it is. It's a long haul of two years. Each one of those things can go by quickly and slowly, simultaneously. It's 2023 now. But it still feels like it was 2021, 2020, or even 2019 just yesterday.

**Drumm McNaughton**

There was this thing called COVID in the middle of that.

**Matt Frank**

I don't even remember that. I've blocked that out of my mind at this point.

**Drumm McNaughton**

We mentioned a couple days ago that the expectations of generations are educated and informed by Amazon.

**Matt Frank**

Oh, my goodness, yes.

**Drumm McNaughton**

You click on a button, and it shows up at your door five minutes later. Well, maybe that's a little bit of an exaggeration. It's more like 10 or 20 minutes. But you can get anything you want by just going onto the web, and it's there within two days.

**Matt Frank 17:16**

Yeah. The instant gratification portion of it is definitely there. For Millennials, Gen Z, and the generation after that Alphas, it will become an increasing part of their education experience. However, I would like to take what you were saying and expand it a bit further.

It's not just about the gratification portion, the Amazon-like expectations. There's this really cool sociological term called "the Amazon effect," which has a number of applications to it. But one of the core principles is being able to show you that you know yourself. This goes back to the personalization principle of microcredentialing. It's being able to obtain the right credentials that make you want to progress on a learning path that is right for where you want to go, and being able to do this in a quick and automated fashion. That's the fastest way to keep people down a continuously learning or continuously purchasing pathway, whether it's from a for-profit organization or a path of continuous credentialing. Education is not only for the sake of education. It's for the sake of growth in this world. To a degree, it's the sake of profit, which can get into a slightly dangerous area of bringing in the privatization of overall education for professionals. We can certainly go down that rabbit hole if you want to.

**Drumm McNaughton**

I don't think we need to.

**Matt Frank**

That could be a podcast unto itself. But at the end of the day, that Amazon effect is there. And it's important for education to embrace that to stay current.

**Drumm McNaughton 18:57**

You bring up an interesting point, and I'll thank you for that segue there. It makes my job that much easier. When trying to find what the right credential is, demonstrating that you have the skills and knowledge to be employable, and when to go out to get that credential, how do you know it's worth anything?

**Matt Frank 19:19**

That's the million dollar question, right? What is the value of that credential? Who assesses it? How does it stay at its value? And how do you rotate it out if it's no longer providing value to the industry or the individual? These are the essential questions.

**Drumm McNaughton** 19:36

Yeah. It's the Wild West out there when it comes to microcredentials. Digital certificate programs are generally run through higher ed. There's regulation through accreditation, etc. But with microcredentials, there's nothing like that.

**Matt Frank** 19:53

Not today. We could be building towards that in a way that would involve maybe the Federal or State Department of Education. Maybe the Secretary of Education? Informal non-governmental councils could be formed, along with NC-SARA or other organizations that could do that. But we're not there yet, right? What it ultimately comes down to, in terms of trusting the source of a credential, is trusting their credentials as organizations. Most of these CEU-, CPD-, CME-type programs that exist—and I could come up with more alphabet soup, if you want to.

**Drumm McNaughton**

No, that's okay. You've already lost me on those.

**Matt Frank**

Continuing Professional of...

**Drumm McNaughton**

Oh, yeah, no, I get it.

**Matt Frank**

...Credits. All of those things, right?

**Drumm McNaughton** 20:44

I was thinking CBD, and, it's like, "No, I don't think that's what we're talking about."

**Matt Frank** 20:50

I know I live in Colorado. But, again, different podcast episode, Drumm. If professional organizations like the American Medical Association, the American Psychological Association, or various other societies and organizations are backing credentials in creating standards of professionalism for their industries, I think it would be worth ingesting that as a legitimate source of continuous education.

However, to date, I would question it if the credential is coming from an organization without industry trust or buy-in or that is purely motivated by profit as opposed to industry growth or community engagement and growth—which is part of this as well, in creating those localized partnerships for community expansion and betterment. As we move forward in the professionalization of credentialing, those sorts of actors won't remain in the space for too long.

**Drumm McNaughton** 22:04

You're absolutely right with that. But you're already starting to talk about accreditation-like approval like the AMA, APA or major nonprofit associations that are very reputable. Now, if a college or university wants to get



into these type of things, how do they do that? You have faculty who are “subject matter experts” in many areas. But are they the subject matter experts in the right areas needed for microcredentials? Harvard comes to mind here. They offer different courses through their School of Education for university presidents. It's a brand name. It's recognized. They're appreciated. And they're valued. But if you have Podunk University offering something like that, how do you know it's any good?

**Matt Frank 23:10**

If it's a public-private partnership, look at where their partnership started. So let's take a public university partnering with a private industry organization, a technology company, a medical company, or something along those lines. It could also be a private university like Harvard doing the same thing. You can find the value by looking at the time taken to incorporate the multiple voices of the university community and then to design the program. If it's just coming from the external private organization that's dictating to the university how they should design it, I would question its value. Again, it goes back to that whole idea of profit over learning and development. But if the program has been designed with deans, faculty, and community engagement managers at the university, then you definitely are in a place where you can start to see and appreciate the value of a program like that.

Faculty and deans have an important voice in ensuring these types of credentialing programs are in line with university and departmental values and areas that are essential as tenants for the industries that they teach to. But they're not the voices that get to veto the design at the end of the day. This should be a collaborative process without necessarily one body or another being able to veto the other on the final product. At that point, you're pushing an agenda.

**Drumm McNaughton 24:57**

Don't sugarcoat it. How do you feel?

**Matt Frank 25:02**

I have respect for all these bodies equally and I want them all to work together in collaboration for the benefit of the learners and the institutions they serve. Modernizing them is the only way that they'll continue to survive for the next several generations.

**Drumm McNaughton 25:22**

I agree. It's interesting because when I think about those institutions that could do this successfully, I think about Harvard with their School of Education, Columbia, MIT from a technology standpoint, and Carnegie Mellon with their AI and machine learning, etc. They all have specialties. Rural-serving institutions have their own areas of expertise as well, like Appalachian State's agriculture programs. They can be offering microcredentials around their specialties and working with external organizations as advisors.

**Matt Frank 26:18**

Oh, absolutely. Now, of course, Spring Appalachian State up to Virginia Tech Hokey, that was a tenuous move on your part there.

**Drumm McNaughton 26:33**

Why is it you have this Appalachian State on your background on your screen? No, I'm just kidding.



**Matt Frank 26:39**

Oh, wow. Okay, we're going to have to edit out the next part. And we're back. No, I agree with you completely. Rural universities and colleges have something to offer here. They can also embrace these things in a more agile way than a larger—and I hesitate to call it more urban university because that just happens to be placement as opposed to anything else—let's say more established university. These rural universities can embrace the time to value tenants in a way that a more established university may not be able to.

When talking about microcredentialing, badging, or progressive degree value as part of the modernization of traditional degree programs, a land grant school that's dealing primarily with farming and land management and has a biochemistry department to study fertilizer or agricultural principals can partner with experts in their field to create progressive apprenticeship-type programs within their overall learning structures that provides hands-on practical skill building and value to people who want to show the value of their learnings before they get that piece of paper at the end of their journey. I would argue that that makes them more valuable to the modernization process of education than some of these more established, old-school traditional universities that still say the value of an education is teaching you how to think and to be a well-rounded individual without taking in the practicalities of what the job market requires today.

**Drumm McNaughton 29:00**

That's spot on. I'm going throw a curveball in here, too. I would venture to say that probably 80% of the universities are not well branded. They really don't know what they're known for. For them, a branding exercise is "Let's ask faculty what we're known for." That's part of it. But brand positioning comes from outside your institution. What you're known for comes from the people who hire your graduates and your alumni. Only then can you start to focus on what you can provide in those areas, from a microcredentialing and academic perspective, which can be monetized going forward. Does that make sense?

What I mean by this is institutions are known for certain things. When you take a look at MIT, it's engineering. It's new knowledge. It's technology. If you're Appalachian State or Virginia Tech—I'll tip the hat to your Hokies there—you're known for different things. And so, does it make sense for a Virginia Tech or an Appalachian State to offer a microcredential in high tech when that's not really their area of expertise?

**Matt Frank 30:51**

Perception is one of these tricky areas. There's internal and external perception. There's partial external perception, which is sort of factored into how the *US News & World Report* rankings come out, right? There's not necessarily hard numbers behind that. But a lot of that comes down to organizations or schools talking about one another and how they feel they rank. I would say that it's worth the experimentation for a school to invest in at least a small part in a microcredentialing program that they feel speaks to their strengths. But if they were to look at external reviews, the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, or these other trade magazines that show them what they're known for as opposed to what they feel they're known for, they can become a little bit more self-aware and invest in the areas where they're seeing core strength.

**Drumm McNaughton 31:49**

Makes perfect sense. Matt, we have gotten to the end of our time. It has been a fascinating conversation for me. I thank you. What are three takeaways for university presidents and boards.

**Matt Frank** 32:02

Sure. Microcredentialing is not your enemy. That's number one. It's a modernization process for education that, if embraced appropriately and programmatically, can help your university, school, or college embrace the changes that are coming both from a demographics perspective of who's enrolling and a partnerships perspective with where they want to go in the world of work after they're through with their traditional educational programs.

Number two is investing in partnerships with professional organizations, societies, associations, as well as private industries to make sure that the non-degree certifications and microcredentials you're creating are in line with industry expectations and remain practical to the learners that you're offering them to. Always make sure that you're continuously evaluating and putting your best foot forward.

Number three is an area that might take a little bit of maneuvering, but investing in the technology to support these progressive value initiatives. Budgets are tight at schools of all shapes and sizes. When I worked for various public universities in the state of Virginia, when we went through the budgetary cycles every year—your listeners know this and you know this—there was always the question of how we could stretch this a little bit further. Where can we cut? How can we lead our alumni in our advancement organizations to make up this deficit in ways that we can.

Take a true stock of what you're investing in as an institution and see where money-making programs like microcredentialing and certification programs can fit into that overall budgetary makeup and hopefully make up for some deficits that you're seeing in specific areas. If you're offering technology credentials in your business school, that can help make up for possibly some lack of research funding that you're able to offer from a central university budget, right? These are money-making programs at the end of the day. They're not money-losing programs that you do for the benefit of public good. So there we go.

**Drumm McNaughton** 34:26

Those are great takeaways. Thank you. What's next for you?

**Matt Frank** 34:31

For me, I am about to go head down on some projects at Blackthorn.io, regarding continuing online and professional education. It's a new app that we're coming out with. So if you watch our spaces you'll see more of that soon for an app called Storefront. But it's actually getting a few new microcredentials myself. There are a few new super badges that came out in the Salesforce world that I'm going to take head-on this weekend and try to get certified in. I'm working towards a few new technology certifications that will really help as both me as an individual and my company as we adopt some of the new cloud technologies that make life easier for institutions to embrace and engage with learners.

**Drumm McNaughton** 35:16

So you've just given us a couple of new microcredentials that institutions could be providing if they partner with Salesforce or someone else like that. Thank you.

**Matt Frank** 35:28

Absolutely.

**Drumm McNaughton** 35:32

Matt, this has been a pleasure. I thank you so much for being on the show and look forward to the next time.

**Matt Frank** 35:36

Definitely. Thank you so much for having me. This has been a lot of fun.

**Drumm McNaughton** 35:40

Likewise, take care of my friend. Thanks for listening today. I'd like to give a special thank you to Matt Frank for sharing his perspectives on microcredentials, a fascinating topic, and one that is changing the landscape of higher education. Join us next week for our conversation with Kevin Grubb from Villanova University. Kevin's an expert in structuring college programs to prepare graduates for their career. He'll join us to talk about what they've done at Villanova to prepare their students to be career ready. Until next time.

36:18

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