



## Case Study

As part of our landscape research on *Micro-credentials for Social Mobility in Rural Postsecondary Communities*, Digital Promise conducted case studies in partnership with four innovative postsecondary institutions that are using micro-credentials. Learn more about how these institutions are leveraging educator-industry partnerships to create real-time pathways for rural learners in their region.

# University of Maine System's - All Learning Counts – Maine



## Introduction

The native home of Indigenous communities and the site of some of the first cross-Atlantic settlers, the state of Maine remains the destination of a diverse group of immigrant populations seeking to create a new, viable means of financial prosperity. Many of the rural regions of Maine, decreasing in residential numbers, remain largely White and economically challenged, as seasonal industries such as logging, fishing, and tourism remain the most consistent sources of employment.

A lack of reliable internet access in some regions hinders many residents from accessing online resources and engaging in learning opportunities, making it difficult to complete many programs. Commute times also pose a challenge, particularly in remote regions with rugged terrain. However, in multiple regions across the state, there are efforts to increase connectivity in order to increase a viable, sustained ecosystem of transferable knowledge, skills, and abilities gained outside of traditional higher education settings and job opportunities. In response to a lack of resources, which often compel residents to leave the state, the University of Maine System sought to increase access to fields of healthcare, technology and IT via micro-credentials, to increase skills that were both needed across the state and more easily transferable.

*"I don't think companies are interested in how many years you have working, especially in technology. To help the company grow, you have to show your 'know-how', the skills you have, because the technology is changing every day. 10–15 years in one position? That doesn't make sense, because you are not developing your skills."*

– António Mabiala (Learner), Maine

## Micro-credentialing Initiative

*"It's an accomplishment that goes beyond the walls here. It's not a certificate from a prison program. Those are great, but they don't always make sense outside of these walls. It's just lost in translation; so, I think having something that is a link to a larger world is huge. I think socially, I'd like to imagine that it matters not only to the individual, but also to our communities that recognize the credentials; that just because a person's body was held captive in a prison, in an institution, that does not mean that their mind stopped or that the learning was arrested, or that their desire to move forward didn't exist."*

– Abbie Embry-Turner (Instructor)  
Teacher, Southern Maine Women's Reentry Center

A coalition of public and private organizations with a mission to develop a micro-credential ecosystem, [All Learning Counts – Maine](#) intends to provide quality skills and credentials that meet the needs of employers across industries. Statewide [micro-credentialing](#) allows the University of Maine System and its partners to develop coordinated credentials and better connect with employers and remote rural communities. The University of Maine System and the Maine Community College System offer micro-credentials including [Education Design Labs 21st Century Skills](#) badges. Among the partnering organizations, the Southern Maine Women's Reentry Center (SMWRC) currently provides classes to approximately 22 incarcerated women, taught by facility instructors as well as faculty from Eastern Maine Community College.

According to administrators, communicating the value of micro-credentials has been vital to participant enrollment and partner support. Messaging to learners is concerned with informing them of the ways that these credentials can document skills and competencies. Conversely, messaging to potential employers is concerned with conveying the understanding of how micro-credentials can aid in hiring and retaining qualified workers.

The initiative pilot captured robust demographic data concerning the 35 earners across the state. Nine indicated that they reside in rural areas while 3 did not specify the type of area in which they reside. Approximately 56% of participants that indicated living in rural areas also indicated that they receive public assistance. Quantitative data revealed learner demographic data that revealed that approximately 23% of the pilot population indicated that they identify as an individual with a disability, 63% indicate that they are a person with low income, and 31% identify as an English language learner at the time of program entry. Approximately 43% of total participants spoke a primary language that was not English. The initiative also has been extended to 22 additional women in the SMWRC. Complete race and ethnicity data was not available.

*"We would love to have IT companies in Maine put their visible stamp of approval on the micro-credentials because we are aware that it would strengthen its value."*

– Dr. Claire Sullivan (Issuer)  
Assistant Vice Chancellor for Innovation  
in Digital Badges and Micro-credentials,  
University of Maine System

## Collaborating Organizations

All Learning Counts – Maine is a partnership of 11 leading education and workforce development organizations across the state, including:

- University of Maine System’s campuses
  - Partner: The Wabanaki Center, University of Maine
  - Partner: The University of Maine at Augusta
- Maine Community College System’s campus at Eastern Maine Community College
- Maine Department of Corrections
  - Vendor: Edovo
- Maine Department of Labor and the State Workforce Board
- Maine Department of Education Adult Education programs and local programs
  - United Technologies Center
- Educate Maine
- Maine State Library

## Value of Micro-credentials in Maine

*“It’s a great opportunity for students to have something that, if they decide to continue on into post-secondary, that it’s going to have some value for them there as well. And, hopefully, be a little aspirational for them as well, that if they understand when they earn that micro-credential that, ‘Hey, this is worth nine college credits.’ That they know that maybe before college seemed maybe out of reach for them. But with those nine credits, it’s a good boost to kind of get them started to do something that they may have not thought they could do before.”*

– Amy Poland (Developer)  
Professional Development Coordinator, Maine Department of Education, Office of Adult Education

## What Value Do Micro-credentials Bring for Rural Learners Who Earn Them?

All members of All Learning Counts – Maine intend to engage in equitable practices to provide access and training residents of the state. As such, there is a particular focus on low-income residents, Indigenous populations, New Mainers (including immigrant and refugee populations), and incarcerated citizens. One of the prevailing ideas of the program is to provide new immigrant populations the opportunity to increase their English language skills while simultaneously adopting skills in their intended fields.

The University of Maine System has allowed for some micro-credentials to qualify as credits toward degree completion in various academic disciplines that can eventually count toward an associates or bachelor’s degree. A value not always afforded by micro-credentialing programs, this is especially appealing to some individuals who must sometimes temporarily suspend their educational pursuits for any number of reasons.

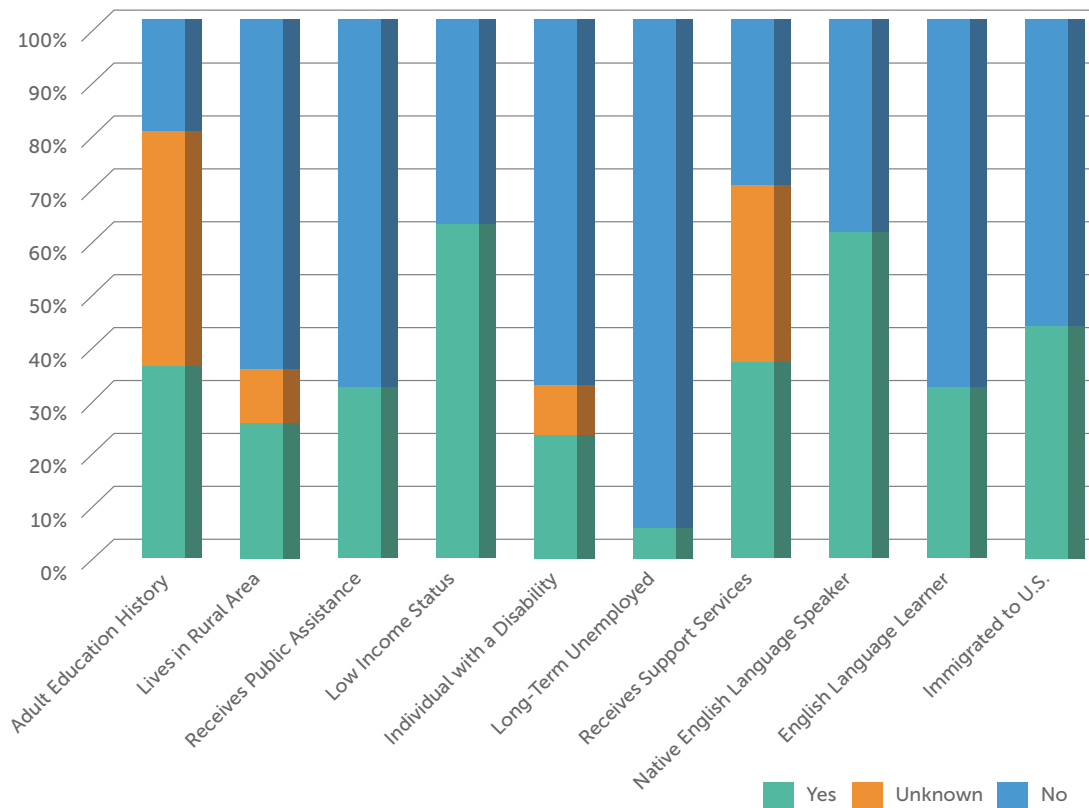
Earners of micro-credentials were explicit that they gravitated toward the program given the flexibility of the pace of completion. All program participants stated that they were able to complete modules when their schedules permitted. Older earners, including a participant re-entering the workforce in a different field, remarked about the ability to start, stop, and resume the completion of content.

*"I did a lot of work to earn the credentials... and I worked on myself throughout the Life Ready part of the credentials. So, I learned a lot about myself that I didn't know before. And I do think that if it is offered to people, I think they should jump on that."*

– Candida (Learner)  
Southern Maine Women's Reentry Center

**Table 4. University of Maine System—All Learning Counts Demographic Data**

### Learner Demographics: University of Maine - All Learning Counts



Site locations: Ellsworth Adult Education; Lewiston Adult Education; Marshwood Adult and Community Education; Portland Adult Education; RSU 25 Adult and Community Education  
NOTE: SMWRC demographics not included

## Challenges

Remaining as the most pressing concern for administrators is the need to amplify communications about the potential value of micro-credentials to both prospective learners and employers. Increasing employer recognition of micro-credentials is also a priority, beckoning the need for more communication with industry leaders throughout the state. Administrators also recognize the need to supplement messaging to residents in a manner that will successfully reach them, using language that they can readily interpret. While there is a general understanding of the need to spread awareness, learners in the Southern Maine Women's Reentry Center (SMWRC) expressed a desire for reinforced explanations of the logistics of the program. Nonetheless, they conveyed positive experience in earning multiple badges, despite some uncertainty of how they could be applied.

## What's Next?

As previously mentioned, the programs intend to increase vital messaging to multiple stakeholders in their efforts to raise awareness on the potential footprint of micro-credentialing. Important to the administrators is the objective to create micro-credentials centering the history of Indigenous peoples in the region. With this population in mind – as well as other marginalized residents – the University of Maine System is also seeking to utilize micro-credentials to create a sense of belonging.

*"How do you really get learners ready for these experiences? It is not as simple as offering a micro-credential. It's frequently as complicated as, what does the whole person need to be ready to pursue that micro-credential?"*

– Rosa Redonnett (Recognizer)  
Associate Chancellor for Student Success  
and Credential Attainment, University of  
Maine System

Moving forward, program administrators seek to potentially facilitate the inclusion of adult education programs as central partners, providing space for such programs to align efforts with the university and community college systems; a welcomed shift given the perception that micro-credentials serve to validate the work that adult education providers have long been doing. The initiative also seeks to develop specific micro-credentials that facilitate a sense of belonging. Additionally, Maine intends to create micro-credentials that are specific to the history of indigenous populations in the region.