

Building Bridges with Badges: A Metropolitan University's Partnership Evolution to Workforce Development through Micro-Credentialing

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Cite as: Provencio, A.L., Cooper, C., Cox, T., Simmons, C.K., Lamb, T.G., & Castillo, D. (2026). Building Bridges with Badges: A Metropolitan University's Partnership Evolution to Workforce Development through Micro-Credentialing. *Metropolitan Universities*, 37(2), 212-236. DOI: 10.18060/29435

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Abstract

Metropolitan universities serving rapidly growing Hispanic populations face a critical gap between traditional degree pathways and the workforce development needs of working adults and entrepreneurs who need accessible, culturally responsive credentials. This case study examines how a decade-long partnership between a metropolitan university and a regional Hispanic chamber of commerce evolved over twelve years, asking: *How can metropolitan universities leverage long-term community partnerships to create alternative credentialing pathways that address economic mobility while advancing institutional missions?*

Drawing on institutional records, program documentation, digital badge issuance data, participant feedback, and three previously published longitudinal accounts of the partnership, this study employs a descriptive case study methodology to trace how sustained relational investment created conditions for credential innovation. In 2025, the partnership issued 564 digital badges across three programs — Latino Leadership OKC, Women's Business Center, and Business Fundamentals in Spanish — reaching 180 total participants.

Preliminary participant survey data suggest a high perceived value of credentials and a strong intent to continue learning. Findings point to long-term relational investment, equity-centered co-design, and bilingual place-based delivery as enabling conditions rather than replicable program features. This framework offers metropolitan universities navigating Hispanic-Serving Institution trajectories a model for creating alternative credentialing pathways that simultaneously advance community workforce development and institutional mission.

Keywords: anchor institutions, Hispanic-serving institutions, micro-credentials, alternative credentials, university-community partnerships, place-based partnerships, workforce development, economic mobility

Introduction

On September 29, 2025, the University of Central Oklahoma and the Greater Oklahoma City Hispanic Chamber of Commerce formalized more than a decade of collaboration with a signed agreement establishing LX Studio as the Hispanic Chamber's exclusive education partner for micro-credential development, linking the university's academic programs with the needs of local Hispanic businesses and creating new pathways to learning and career growth. The ceremony marked not a beginning but a culmination: the latest phase of a relationship carefully cultivated since 2013, when the two organizations first partnered around a conference room sponsorship and Spanish-language college recruitment workshops. The central story this article examines is how a modest sponsorship arrangement grew into a comprehensive workforce development partnership issuing hundreds of digital badges annually to Hispanic entrepreneurs and community leaders.

The story matters because it is not self-evident. Universities and community organizations frequently form partnerships; most remain transactional, episodic, or narrowly scoped. What conditions allow a partnership to deepen over a decade, survive administrative transitions and budget constraints, and ultimately generate institutional innovation in the form of alternative credentialing pathways? Moreover, what does that trajectory reveal about how metropolitan universities can simultaneously serve community workforce development needs and advance their own institutional missions? This article asks: *How can metropolitan universities leverage long-term community partnerships to create alternative credentialing pathways that address economic mobility while advancing institutional missions?*

The case is situated within a context of significant demographic and economic change. The city's Hispanic population has grown to comprise 22% of the metropolitan area (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024a) and 55% of public-school enrollment (Oklahoma City Public Schools, n.d.), yet Hispanic adults hold bachelor's degrees at significantly lower rates than the general population (Excelencia in Education, 2023). Working Hispanic adults, particularly entrepreneurs, need accessible credentials that validate competencies without requiring enrollment in traditional degree programs. The University of Central Oklahoma's micro-credential partnership with the Hispanic Chamber, formalized in September 2025, represents a strategic institutional response to this workforce development imperative.

This work contributes to ongoing scholarship on the role of anchor institutions in regional economic development (Birch, 2010; Friedman et al., 2013; Harris & Holley, 2016), the potential of alternative credentials to expand educational access (Ha et al., 2023), and the evolution of university–community partnerships from transactional to transformational relationships (Bringle & Clayton, 2012; Holland, 2005; Pandya et al., 2025). It builds directly on three previous articles in *Metropolitan Universities* documenting the University of Central Oklahoma's expanding relationship with Oklahoma City's Hispanic community (Kinders & Pope, 2016; Barthell et al.,

2018; Barthell et al., 2019), providing a longitudinal account that demonstrates how sustained place-based commitment enables institutional innovation. The power of place — the 2025 CUMU conference theme — manifests here not as geography alone but as the deliberate, sustained choice to embed institutional resources, relationships, and expertise within a specific community over time.

Theoretical Framework and Analytical Approach

This case study is guided by four intersecting theoretical frameworks that collectively inform how the partnership was analyzed, how evidence was interpreted, and how findings are situated within broader scholarship on metropolitan university engagement, alternative credentials, and equity-centered workforce development.

Anchor institution theory provides the foundational lens for understanding the University of Central Oklahoma's evolving relationship with the city's Hispanic community. Anchor institutions are typically defined as large, place-based entities that are unlikely to relocate and therefore have strong incentives to improve conditions in the communities where they are located (Birch, 2010). However, physical presence does not automatically translate to effective anchoring. The theory distinguishes between institutions that simply exist in places and those that actively engage in community and economic development (Friedman et al., 2013; Harris & Holley, 2016). This distinction guides the case analysis: rather than documenting the University of Central Oklahoma's presence in the city, the study traces how the university's engagement evolved from transactional proximity toward active, asset-leveraging anchoring.

Community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), developed to understand the assets that students of color bring to educational settings, provides the equity lens through which Hispanic entrepreneurs and learners, in this case, are understood. Applied here, this framework shifts the analytical orientation away from deficit-based framings of attainment gaps and toward an asset-based examination of what Hispanic entrepreneurs already possess and of which institutional design choices honor or undermine those assets. Specifically, it informs analysis of curriculum co-development, Spanish-language delivery, and community facilitator selection as structural design decisions rather than programmatic accommodations.

Adult learning theory provides a complementary equity lens by centering the specific characteristics, motivations, and constraints of adult learners as design requirements rather than contextual variables. Knowles' (1984) framework of andragogy identifies that adults are self-directed, bring prior experience as a resource, and are motivated by the immediate applicability of learning to real-life problems. Bean and Metzner's (1985) model of non-traditional student attrition identifies environmental variables, such as work demands, family responsibilities, financial constraints, and geographic distance, as primary factors in adult learners' departure,

independent of academic performance. This framework directs analytical attention toward whether and how program design choices address the environmental barriers that prevent adult Hispanic entrepreneurs from accessing conventional professional development pathways.

Alternative credentialing literature establishes the quality and design criteria against which the partnership's micro-credential programs are assessed. This literature identifies several conditions necessary for alternative credentials to generate genuine value: credentials must involve rigorous, competency-based assessment; they must be understood and valued by employers; they must be portable and stackable; and they must be accessible to learners who cannot pursue traditional degree pathways (Ha et al., 2023). Research on adult learner persistence further emphasizes that completion is shaped by design features that reduce environmental friction, including scheduling flexibility, financial accessibility, and social belonging (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Cercone, 2008).

Place-based education theory emphasizes that effective learning connects to the specific places and communities where learners live and work, rather than treating knowledge as abstract and context-independent (Gruenewald, 2003; Gruenewald & Smith, 2014). This framework guides analysis of curriculum content, delivery location, and facilitation choices. The distinction between transactional and transformational university–community engagement (Bringle & Clayton, 2012; Holland, 2005; Pandya et al., 2025) provides a developmental framework for tracing the partnership's evolution across its three phases.

Together, these frameworks operate as an integrated analytical orientation. Anchor institution theory and the transactional-to-transformational continuum guide the longitudinal, phase-based structure of the analysis. Community cultural wealth directs attention to equity and design. Alternative credentialing criteria provide the evaluative standard. Place-based education theory focuses interpretation on location, language, and community context as substantive program features. The research question *“How can metropolitan universities leverage long-term community partnerships to create alternative credentialing pathways that address economic mobility while advancing institutional missions?”* is examined through this integrated lens across all phases of the partnership and in assessing early outcomes.

Methodology

This article employs a descriptive case study design to examine how a decade-long university–community partnership evolved into a formalized micro-credential initiative. Case study methodology is appropriate when researchers seek to understand a complex, context-dependent phenomenon within its real-world setting (Yin, 2018). Evidence was drawn from multiple sources. Primary documentation includes partnership agreements, grant applications and reports, program curricula, credential frameworks, assessments, digital badge issuance records, and institutional communications generated between 2013 and 2025. Institutional records include

enrollment data and participation figures across all three programs. The analysis also draws on three previously published articles in *Metropolitan Universities* (Kinders & Pope, 2016; Barthell et al., 2018; Barthell et al., 2019), enabling longitudinal tracing of the partnership's evolution. Micro-credential participant feedback was gathered via an end-of-course survey; data collection for subsequent cohorts is ongoing.

The authors occupy an insider position relative to this case, as institutional participants in the partnership being studied. This positionality offers depth of access and contextual knowledge unavailable to external researchers, while also requiring transparency about its limitations. Consistent with reflective practitioner traditions in applied higher education scholarship (Schön, 1983), this insider perspective is treated as an asset for generating thick description while acknowledging that it precludes independent verification of claims.

Analysis proceeded through a structured review of documentation across all three partnership phases, identifying key decision points, resource commitments, programmatic shifts, and emerging outcomes. Findings are organized chronologically and thematically to trace how sustained relational investment created conditions for credential innovation. Given the partnership's formal agreement signing in September 2025, outcome data are preliminary and primarily descriptive; longitudinal impact assessment will require future study.

The Case: University of Central Oklahoma and the Greater Oklahoma City Hispanic Chamber of Commerce

A Decade of Demographic and Economic Change

The city's dramatic demographic transformation over the past two decades forms the essential backdrop to this partnership's evolution and its workforce development ambitions. Between 2000 and 2010, the metropolitan area's Hispanic population surged by 85%, reaching over 106,000 residents, or approximately 17% of the city's population (Kinders & Pope, 2016). By 2024, the Hispanic population reached approximately 22% of the city's population and 11% of the state's total (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024a). With a median age of just 24 years, the community's demographic profile has profound implications for educational institutions and workforce development (Excelencia in Education, 2023). These demographic patterns signal ongoing growth that will reshape educational and workforce landscapes for decades. For the 2024-2025 school year, Hispanics accounted for 22% of total enrollment (Oklahoma State Department of Education, 2025), but 55% of students in Oklahoma City public schools, making them the clear majority in the state's largest school district (Oklahoma City Public Schools, n.d.).

The economic dimensions reveal both significant contributions and persistent challenges. Hispanic workers make up approximately 9% of the state's labor force (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024b) and are concentrated in construction, manufacturing, hospitality, and agriculture.

However, only 20% of Hispanic adults in the state held an associate's degree or higher in 2021, compared to 39% of white non-Hispanic adults (Excelencia in Education, 2023). This gap represents thousands of individuals whose economic mobility remains constrained by educational barriers.

The workforce development imperative becomes clearer when examining the specific needs of Hispanic entrepreneurs. Many operate with strong practical experience but limited access to formal business education. Language barriers compound these challenges. The Hispanic Chamber's Women's Business Center entrepreneurship program maintained a waitlist of approximately 120 individuals, far exceeding capacity, and a concrete indicator that demand for Spanish-language business education in the community outpaced what existing programs could provide. Established business owners want targeted professional development delivered in Spanish, at accessible community locations on Oklahoma City's south side, rather than on a university campus, and in short workshop sessions scheduled around typical business hours so that owners can attend without closing their businesses or taking extended time away from operations. The waitlist was not an anomaly but a symptom of a broader structural gap: a community with significant entrepreneurial activity and ambition, and insufficient institutional infrastructure to support it.

The University of Central Oklahoma's role within this context had evolved substantially alongside these demographic shifts. By fall 2025, the University of Central Oklahoma achieved emerging Hispanic-serving institution status, with Hispanic students comprising 15% of the student body. However, truly serving this community requires more than enrollment increases. It demands meaningful presence in the city, cultural competence across all university levels, and recognition that the University of Central Oklahoma's role must extend beyond traditional college pathways to include workforce development and entrepreneurial support for Hispanic communities across the metro.

Partnership Evolution: From Presence to Innovation

The partnership between the University of Central Oklahoma and the Hispanic Chamber evolved through three distinct phases, each building on the foundation established by the previous phase, responding to emergent needs, and deepening institutional commitment. The relationship began pragmatically in 2013 when Hispanic Chamber's president David Castillo, having observed the University of Central Oklahoma's efforts to reach Hispanic families through Spanish-language campus tours, approached the university about sponsoring space in the Hispanic Chamber's new facility. The University of Central Oklahoma agreed to sponsor a conference room and a classroom, committing \$25,000 annually for a renewable two-year contract (Kinders & Pope, 2016). This financial commitment enabled the Hispanic Chamber to furnish and equip a community meeting space — with laptop computers available for visitor use, projection

technology, and high-speed internet access — providing resources many guests lacked at home. The space also gave the University of Central Oklahoma a physical presence in the community, approximately 20 miles from the University of Central Oklahoma's suburban Edmond campus, in an urban core otherwise lacking access to four-year institutions.

The strategic importance of this physical presence cannot be overstated. Rather than expecting Hispanic families to travel north to the University of Central Oklahoma campus, the university brought services directly to the community. The Office of Undergraduate Admissions began conducting college-readiness workshops at the Hispanic Chamber, offering scholarship application assistance, ACT preparation, and financial aid guidance, all delivered bilingually with Spanish-speaking staff available to address questions from parents whose primary language was Spanish. The workshops drew capacity crowds, often overflowing the conference room's seating, validating the strategy of meeting the community where they were rather than expecting them to come to the university. University of Central Oklahoma representatives also began attending Hispanic Chamber events, building trust and visibility through consistent presence. During this initial phase, the University of Central Oklahoma saw a 21% increase in Hispanic first-time freshmen and transfer students, from 388 to 409 students (Kinders & Pope, 2016).

The second phase, from 2016 to 2020, saw the University of Central Oklahoma institutionalize its commitment through administrative structures, personnel investments, and programmatic development. In 2016, the University of Central Oklahoma created the Office of Global and Cultural Competencies within the Division of Academic Affairs, appointing an assistant vice president to oversee diversity initiatives and community engagement (Barthell et al., 2019). Critically, this office included a director of cultural outreach and diversity strategies position specifically focused on the city's Hispanic community engagement. The director became embedded at the Hispanic Chamber, working on-site twice weekly, creating a sustained presence and deep collaboration that moved beyond episodic programming. This embedded model created an authentic partnership rather than a vendor-client relationship, with the University of Central Oklahoma and the Hispanic Chamber working together on program development and grant writing (Barthell et al., 2019). The Women's Business Center entrepreneurship program was the result of one of these collaborative grant-writing processes and is sustained today.

Additionally, the University of Central Oklahoma engaged with Latino Leadership OKC, a six-month leadership development program. By 2019, the University of Central Oklahoma had sponsored 10 participants, including faculty and staff, with an 80% retention rate, substantially higher than typical rates (Barthell et al., 2019). The Hispanic Success Initiative, launched in 2015, connected Hispanic students with faculty mentors and created a cohort-based community. Participants were retained at 78% from fall 2015 to spring 2017, compared to 71% for all Hispanic undergraduate students (Barthell et al., 2019). The partnership reached the highest levels of both organizations, with the Hispanic Chamber president joining the University of

Central Oklahoma's president's council while the University of Central Oklahoma's provost became chair of the Hispanic Chamber board.

Following these developments, the University of Central Oklahoma experienced administrative transitions and budget constraints between 2019 and 2023 related to state funding reductions and COVID-19 disruptions. However, this period created opportunities for strategic reconsideration. University of Central Oklahoma leadership recognized that while the university had successfully recruited Hispanic students, the broader community needed accessible workforce development pathways beyond traditional degrees.

This recognition catalyzed the third phase: workforce development through micro-credentials, a type of alternative credential. The University of Central Oklahoma defines micro-credentials as validated, assessed recognitions of specific competencies, verified through digital badges that carry metadata attesting to the skills demonstrated. Rather than viewing community engagement solely through student recruitment, the University of Central Oklahoma began conceptualizing service more comprehensively, serving prospective students through outreach, current students through retention initiatives, and working adults through micro-credentials. This approach aligned with the University of Central Oklahoma's identity as a profession-focused institution (University of Central Oklahoma, 2025a) pursuing the Hispanic-Serving Institution designation. University of Central Oklahoma's pursuit of the HSI designation is not merely a demographic milestone; it represents an institutional commitment to restructuring how the university serves its Hispanic community, including through credential pathways that meet Hispanic adult learners where they are rather than requiring them to navigate traditional degree structures.

In February 2025, the Hispanic Chamber presented the University of Central Oklahoma with the Padrinos Award, recognizing sustained commitment to the Hispanic community. Seven months later, President Lamb and David Castillo signed the formal agreement establishing LX Studio as the Hispanic Chamber's exclusive micro-credential education partner.

The Micro-Credential Initiative: Design and Implementation

Needs Assessment and Program Overviews

The pathway to the 2025 partnership involved extensive conversations between the University of Central Oklahoma and Hispanic Chamber leadership about community needs, institutional capacities, and sustainable collaboration. The initiative began with the Hispanic Chamber articulating observed needs rather than the University of Central Oklahoma arriving with pre-designed programs. The two specific needs were 1) credentialing for existing programs, and 2) fundamental business education in Spanish. The University of Central Oklahoma, through LX Studio, possessed technical capacity for credential design and production, while the College of

Business faculty offered disciplinary expertise. The convergence of community need, institutional capacity, and sustained relationship created conditions for innovation.

The partnership encompasses three complementary programs. Latino Leadership OKC had operated successfully across multiple cohorts, graduating 30 to 40 participants annually (Barthell et al., 2019), but had never offered formal credentials. The Hispanic Chamber expressed a desire to offer formal recognition to program graduates beyond acknowledgment of participation. For the University of Central Oklahoma's LX Studio, with robust existing micro-credential expertise, this was an easy lift.

The Women's Business Center is the Hispanic Chamber's business development and support program for women entrepreneurs within the Hispanic community. The program spans roughly a year and comprises multiple modalities of learning – online self-paced lessons (provided by Arizona State University in partnership with the Mexican Consulate), in-person workshops, mentorship, team projects, and individual business presentations. The Hispanic Chamber also felt that this program could benefit from the addition of formal credentials, as the participants gain critical business skills that they may find difficult to articulate to others, particularly lenders.

Due to the success of the Women's Business Center, it consistently operates at capacity with a substantial waitlist. Waitlisted entrepreneurs often need business fundamentals education before they can effectively engage with more advanced entrepreneurship training, and many were Spanish-dominant speakers who struggled to find financially and linguistically accessible business education. The revelation that a large audience was underserved led to the development of the third partnership program: Business Fundamentals in Spanish (*Fundamentos Empresariales en Español*).

The Business Fundamentals in Spanish program represents the partnership's most comprehensive co-development effort. While Latino Leadership OKC and Women's Business Center credentials build on existing programs, Business Fundamentals in Spanish was created specifically for this partnership to address a need the Hispanic Chamber had identified but lacked resources to address. To address the gap in the Hispanic Chamber's capacity, the University of Central Oklahoma convened faculty from the College of Business to discuss how the university could meet these needs through culturally responsive programming. The conversation revealed important insights about how business fundamentals are universal, but pedagogy, cultural specificity, and delivery matter enormously. Offering identical content in Spanish translation would be insufficient, as effective business education for Hispanic entrepreneurs requires understanding the contexts in which Hispanic-owned businesses operate, the particular challenges they face, and the cultural values that shape Hispanic approaches to business. Faculty recognized that they brought disciplinary expertise but needed guidance on community context and specific learning needs.

The collaborative design process that emerged involved the Oklahoma City Hispanic Chamber of Commerce staff identifying specific competencies and topics based on community needs, University of Central Oklahoma faculty developing curriculum for those topics grounded in their disciplinary expertise, and refinement from community-based bilingual facilitators who helped adapt the content for cultural relevance. This co-development model ensured that programming remained both academically rigorous and deeply connected to community needs, shaping curriculum development far more effectively than faculty working in isolation could have. The Business Fundamentals in Spanish series offers free, in-person workshops funded through the state Regents for Higher Education workforce micro-credentials and rapid re-employment initiative strategies grant. The grant funding proved essential to program viability by offering workshops at no cost, removing financial barriers that prevent many Hispanic entrepreneurs from accessing professional development. The Spanish-language delivery removes linguistic barriers, the in-person format at the Hispanic Chamber facility removes geographic and logistical barriers, and these design choices reflect an understanding that accessibility requires addressing multiple types of barriers simultaneously.

The Hispanic Chamber selected workshop topics based on areas most requested by their community members, with initial offerings in AI for Business, Sales and Negotiation, the Microsoft Suite, QuickBooks, and LinkedIn for Networking. Faculty from the University of Central Oklahoma College of Business developed a curriculum for each topic, drawing on their disciplinary expertise. A bilingual faculty member then translated the material, ensuring both linguistic accuracy and clarity of business concepts. To ensure cultural and practical relevance, local Hispanic entrepreneurs reviewed and refined the curriculum, validating that the content aligned with real business challenges in their community. These entrepreneurs also served as workshop facilitators, creating a co-development model that blended academic rigor with community-grounded insight. As bilingual instructors, they deliver workshops in Spanish while incorporating English business terminology when appropriate, acknowledging the bilingual reality in which many Hispanic entrepreneurs operate.

Digital Badges and Micro-Credentials

University of Central Oklahoma has been a pioneer in the digital credentialing space, with the university's innovation arm, LX Studio, adopting a micro-credential model in 2019. The program continues evolving as the alternative credential landscape does. At the time of this publication, the University of Central Oklahoma uses Credly, one of the largest digital badging platforms, to host and issue micro-credential digital badges in the Open Badge 3.0 standard (Clements et al., 2020). Open badges make credentials portable across platforms and enable recipients to share credentials widely. Each badge carries metadata, including the assessed competencies, the assessment method, the issuing institution, and the date of achievement. Skill tags were

developed in collaboration between Hispanic Chamber staff, University of Central Oklahoma faculty, and LX Studio. This metadata architecture ensures that the badges carry verifiable, employer-readable information rather than functioning as participation certificates. This transparency enables employers, business partners, or others to understand precisely what the badge represents. Credly allows badges to be translated and available in multiple languages so that earners can view and share them in their preferred language.

Micro-credentials are 1) validated and assessed recognitions of a specific competency or set of competencies; 2) designed to be shorter and more flexible than traditional credentials; and 3) representative of skills acquired via various learning methods, especially (but not exclusively) in non-traditional contexts. The Hispanic Chamber's programs fit cleanly into these criteria and align well with the University of Central Oklahoma's mission to provide accessible upskilling to our metropolitan community. As summarized by Digital Promise, "micro-credentials are closing the gap for historically and systematically excluded learners who find it challenging to commit to the financial and time requirements of higher education pathways" (Galindo et al., 2024, p.25). Integrating micro-credentials with existing Hispanic Chamber services ensures that University of Central Oklahoma's involvement is complementary rather than competitive with Hispanic Chamber programming, enhancing the value of established programs without changing successful models.

Meaningful assessment is a core requirement of LX Studio's micro-credential process. The assessment design for these micro-credentials required additional collaboration, as traditional academic assessment focuses on knowledge acquisition measured through exams or papers. In contrast, micro-credentials validate competency and the ability to apply knowledge in practical contexts (Competency-Based Education Network, 2025). The University of Central Oklahoma's LX Studio team worked with faculty and the Hispanic Chamber staff to design assessments that would authentically measure participants' ability to apply business fundamentals to their own enterprises. The selected assessments are specific to each learning experience, ranging from rubrics applied over the course of a year of programming to a short demonstration of skill after a 2-hour workshop. For the QuickBooks micro-credential, learners complete a simulated bookkeeping task in a small-business scenario, demonstrating the ability to categorize transactions, reconcile accounts, and generate a basic financial report, which the facilitator assesses. The assessments are intended to be achievable and unobstructive to students' motivation, while also providing genuine evidence of learning.

Quality assurance across non-traditional formats requires careful attention. Traditional academic programs benefit from established quality assurance mechanisms, including accreditation standards, learning outcomes assessment, and program review processes. Micro-credentials, particularly those delivered in community settings rather than in campus classrooms, require adapted quality-assurance approaches. University of Central Oklahoma grounds its micro-

credential design in the quality framework established by the Micro-Credentials Partnership of States task force, which specifies that evaluation measures competency using criteria that are specific to the competency being assessed, align with recognized standards, clearly articulate the scope and format of evidence required, and are authentic to the earner's work processes and products (DigiLearn & RTI International, 2022). University of Central Oklahoma's internal controls include faculty-developed assessments, LX Studio review of credential metadata and assessment design, and alignment with institutional learning outcomes processes. Community partners serve a complementary but distinct function: rather than substituting for these internal controls, they validate that the competencies being assessed reflect actual skill needs in the community. In practice, this means Hispanic Chamber staff review proposed competency frameworks and provide feedback on whether the skills being credentialed map onto what Hispanic entrepreneurs and professionals actually need to succeed, thereby providing external relevance validation that academic quality assurance processes alone are not designed to provide.

Value Propositions

For each of the three initiatives, the micro-credentials identify specific competencies the program develops. Participants who complete Latino Leadership OKC earn the micro-credential of the same name, which outlines the key skills they gained through the program—namely, public speaking, civic leadership, governance, networking, and community engagement. Each cohort's experience will vary slightly, but the competencies will remain the same. Each year, a new digital badge will be designed for each cohort. However, operational labor will be minimal, as the framework of skills and earning criteria has been developed to be broadly applicable year-to-year.

The Women's Business Center micro-credential framework is more granular than Latino Leadership, as the content is more consistent across cohorts. A challenge in designing these badges was the program's pacing. The Women's Business Center program develops participants' skills across four training stages, with an emphasis on business fundamentals, collaboration, pitching and presenting, and fundraising. Because participants do not move through these stages sequentially, the micro-credential framework was designed not as a direct map of the program's structure but as a way of recognizing the most consistently emphasized competencies across all stages. This yielded four micro-credentials: business fundamentals, business collaboration, business pitching and presenting, and business fundraising. Each stands alone as a meaningful recognition of competency and can be earned independently of the others, allowing participants to accumulate credentials at their own pace. At the same time, the framework is intentionally designed to encourage full pathway completion: the four credentials stack into a culminating *entrepreneurship* badge, which is awarded only upon earning all four and serves as a comprehensive assertion of small business readiness (see Figure 1). This structure balances

accessibility with motivation, giving participants a tangible goal that conveys both the breadth and depth of their achievements to potential employers, lenders, and business partners.

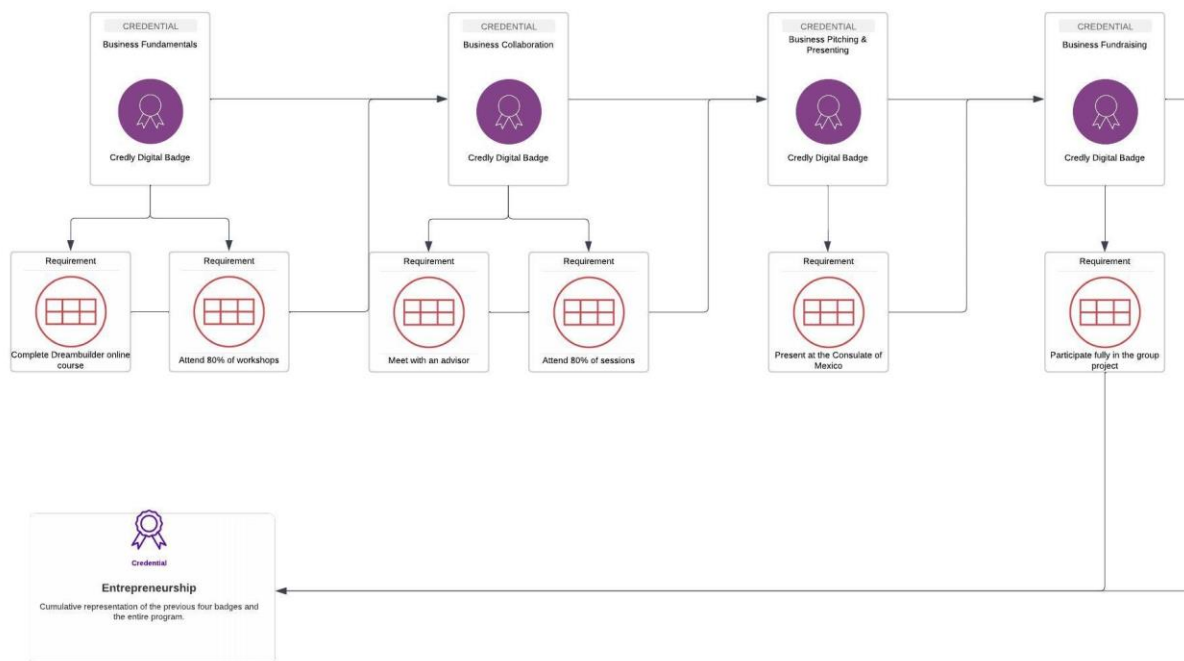


FIGURE 1. Women's Business Center stackable credential pathway.

Note. The four program-level credentials (business fundamentals, business collaboration, business pitching and presenting, and business fundraising) stack into the culminating entrepreneurship badge upon completion of all four. Credentials may be earned independently and in any order.

Each business fundamentals in Spanish micro-credential class has an accompanying digital badge. Completing each of the AI for Business, Sales and Negotiation (see Figure 2), the Microsoft Suite, QuickBooks, and LinkedIn for Networking earn badges that acknowledge mastery of key skills introduced in those sessions. Designing these classes as micro-credentials enabled agile, fast-paced development and allowed participants to walk away with a valuable representation of their learning. These credentials accumulate over time, allowing entrepreneurs who participate in multiple workshop series to build a growing portfolio of verified skills.

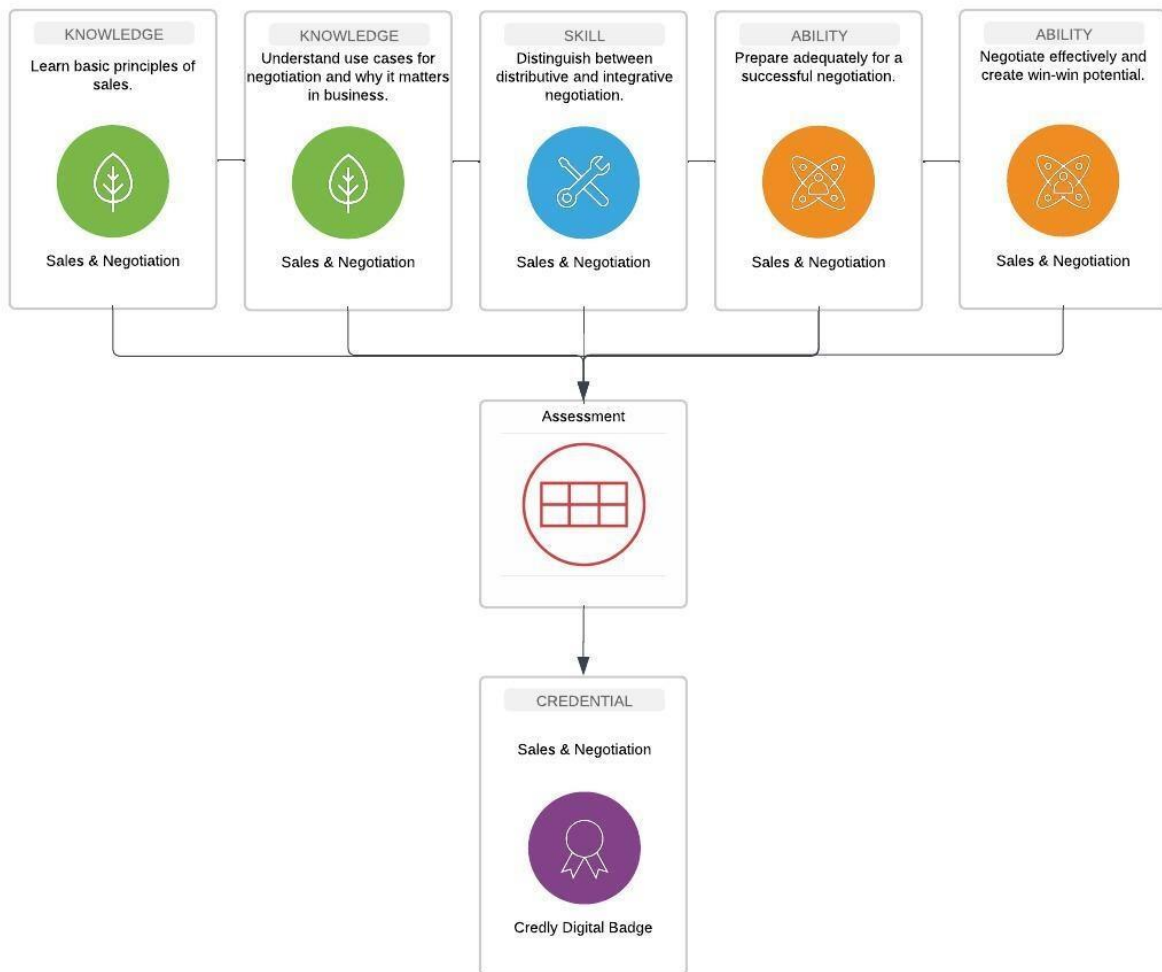


FIGURE 2. Business fundamentals in Spanish: Sales and negotiation micro-credential competency map.

Note. Each workshop in the Business Fundamentals in Spanish series carries an accompanying digital badge; this example demonstrates the competency mapping that leads to each successful micro-credential completion and badge. Participants may accumulate badges across multiple cohorts, building a portfolio of verified competencies over time.

Operations

Implementing micro-credential programs requires coordination across multiple organizational units and careful attention to both academic quality and community accessibility. Central to implementation is LX Studio, bringing established expertise in alternative credentialing. The operational structure distributes responsibilities across several key positions resulting from institutional investment.

The director of downtown strategy and community partnerships serves as the primary liaison between the University of Central Oklahoma and the Hispanic Chamber, coordinating program scheduling and faculty involvement; ensuring that workshop timing aligns with community needs; matching appropriate faculty with content areas; and ensuring that logistical arrangements support effective delivery. Centralizing coordination through a dedicated director avoids fragmentation that occurs when multiple faculty or staff independently schedule community activities without systematic oversight. The micro-credential program coordinator, housed within LX Studio, serves as an operational hub for assessment and credential design. This coordinator works directly with Hispanic Chamber staff to design competency frameworks, manage assessment processes, and issue digital badges upon successful completion through the university's badging platform. Beyond technical functions, the coordinator represents the micro-credential initiative during workshop evenings and tracks participation data across programs, helping identify areas for enhancement. The marketing coordinator supports participant and facilitator recruitment through social media promotion, working with Hispanic Chamber staff to promote workshops through both organizations' channels.

Faculty developing curriculum receive development stipends to recognize their intellectual work. The university's faculty translator received stipends for each module, acknowledging that effective translation requires more than literal word-for-word translation; it requires adaptation that preserves meaning while ensuring clarity for Spanish-speaking learners. Facilitators delivering workshops receive compensation through state Regent's grant funding. This model recognizes faculty work on community partnerships as comparable to teaching credit courses, addressing concerns that community engagement might be expected as uncompensated service. LX Studio's assistant director manages all financial distribution, ensuring timely payment and appropriate documentation for grant reporting and university accounting.

The partnership incorporated promotional and relationship-building activities extending beyond immediate program delivery. Following each workshop, the marketing coordinator contacts facilitators to gather feedback on their experience and motivations for participating in community-engaged teaching. These reflections are featured on LinkedIn, tagging both the Hispanic Chamber and individual facilitators. This strategy promotes facilitators' community involvement, potentially enhancing professional visibility, expresses gratitude for contributions, and, for facilitators who are business owners, supports their enterprises by increasing visibility to potential clients and partners. It creates public documentation of partnership activities, building awareness among community members who might benefit from future programming and potential funders who might support program expansion.

Implementation Challenges

The implementation process has surfaced several challenges that require ongoing attention. Faculty workload and recognition in promotion and tenure processes remain concerns, though the University of Central Oklahoma's identity as a metropolitan, profession-focused institution alleviates many of the obstacles that research-intensive universities face. Faculty workload policies count community engagement toward service requirements, and promotion and tenure guidelines recognize community-engaged scholarship. However, cultural change occurs slowly. Some faculty question whether community engagement merits recognition comparable to traditional scholarship or whether micro-credentials possess sufficient academic rigor to warrant university involvement. While faculty receive compensation for curriculum development and workshop delivery, their time investment often exceeds contracted hours, and skeptical colleagues may signal that such work carries less prestige than traditional academic activities.

Technology accessibility presents another challenge. Accepting digital badges requires internet access and basic digital literacy. While many Hispanic entrepreneurs operate social media for business purposes, suggesting some digital comfort, others, particularly older entrepreneurs or those with limited formal education, may struggle with digital platforms. LX Studio has addressed this by providing technical support during badge-claiming processes, creating simple instructions for accessing and sharing digital credentials, and speaking to participants face-to-face when possible. The credentials themselves are also available in Spanish if learners prefer, ensuring that recognition of their accomplishment is presented in their primary language.

Language considerations extend beyond simply offering content in Spanish. Variations in Spanish dialects, literacy levels, and comfort with academic versus conversational Spanish all require sensitivity. The program addresses this by using facilitators who understand these variations and can adjust their language and examples to ensure comprehension across diverse Spanish-speaking backgrounds. The selection of facilitators has revealed an instructional challenge that requires ongoing attention and improvement. The program deliberately recruits facilitators who are themselves entrepreneurs with demonstrated competency in the business content they teach. This choice offers incredible value through cultural competency and practical business experience that resonates with participants. Facilitators who have navigated the challenges of Hispanic entrepreneurship bring authenticity and credibility that purely academic instructors might lack. However, content knowledge does not always translate effectively to classroom instruction. Entrepreneurs who excel in their businesses may struggle with pedagogical techniques such as pacing content for diverse learners, facilitating group discussions, managing classroom dynamics, or assessing whether participants have genuinely grasped concepts.

Finally, sustainability planning remains an ongoing conversation. The Business Fundamentals in Spanish program currently relies on grant funding that will eventually expire, though it has been funded for another year. Creating sustainable funding models, whether through fee-based

programming, ongoing grants, employer sponsorships, or university budget commitments, will be essential to long-term program viability.

Early Outcomes

While the formal partnership agreement was signed in September 2025, preliminary outcome data indicate strong community demand and meaningful early engagement across all three programs. In 2025, the University of Central Oklahoma issued 564 digital badges across the partnership's three programs (see Table 1) — a figure that, taken together, reflects the breadth of the initiative's reach in its first year. The Women's Business Center program issued 470 badges to 105 unique learners across its four stackable credentials, an average of approximately 4.5 badges per learner. That average is meaningful: it suggests participants are engaging with the full credential pathway rather than stopping at a single badge, which is a meaningful early indicator that the credential architecture is functioning as intended — motivating continued participation rather than isolated completion. Business Fundamentals in Spanish issued 80 badges to 61 learners in its inaugural cohort, and the highly selective, six-month Latino Leadership OKC program issued 14 badges to Class XII participants.

TABLE 1. 2025 micro-credential badge issuance by program

<i>Program</i>	Participants	Badges issued	Avg. Badges per participant
<i>Women's Business Center</i>	105	470	4.5
<i>Business Fundamentals in Spanish</i>	61	80	1.3
<i>Latino Leadership OKC</i>	14	14	1.0
Total	180	564	3.1

Note. Data reflect badge issuance through the end of 2025. The Women's Business Center's average of 4.5 badges per participant reflects engagement across its four stackable credentials and the culminating entrepreneurship badge. Latino Leadership OKC issues one badge per participant upon program completion. Business Fundamentals in Spanish data reflect the inaugural cohort only; data collection is ongoing.

Beyond reach, participant feedback from the business fundamentals in Spanish series offers a preliminary window into the program's reception. An end-of-course survey administered in spring 2026 yielded six complete responses across two cohorts — a small but directionally informative sample — all completed in Spanish, consistent with the program's linguistic design. Five of six respondents (83%) indicated that holding a micro-credential would probably or definitely help them stand out with employers or clients, and five of six indicated they would probably or definitely attend additional coursework in the future. The one dissenting respondent

offered substantive critical feedback: they reported that the ai for business workshop did not meet their expectations, noting that participants were directed to explore tools independently rather than receiving structured guidance on available options, their relative advantages, and practical applications — a facilitation gap the program team is addressing in subsequent iterations.

Qualitative responses to an open-ended question about future learning interests identified accounting, website creation for small businesses, digital systems management, and Canva. Notably, some respondents also requested QuickBooks and PowerPoint workshops — both of which are already part of the program curriculum. This suggests that some participants were not fully aware of the full workshop lineup at the time of their participation, indicating a communication opportunity rather than a curriculum gap. Course-specific feedback expressed a preference for hands-on, instructor-led practice. Because the program was designed from the outset to be hands-on, with participants using their own or provided laptops alongside the instructor, this feedback likely reflects variability in how individual facilitators implemented that design rather than a structural program limitation and reinforces the ongoing challenge of ensuring pedagogical consistency across a community-based facilitator model noted in the implementation challenges section above.

Several limitations constrain the interpretation of these data. The sample size remains small and is drawn exclusively from self-selected respondents, which introduces response bias; participants who completed the survey may differ systematically from those who did not. The survey instrument was administered anonymously and does not allow linkage between responses and demographic characteristics, credential completion, or badge-claiming behavior. Finally, the survey measures perceived value and intent rather than actual behavioral outcomes; whether credential acquisition translates into measurable workforce benefits for participants remains an open empirical question that will require longitudinal follow-up to address.

Faculty engagement has exceeded initial expectations. When the Hispanic Chamber and the University of Central Oklahoma first discussed the Business Fundamentals in Spanish initiative, there was uncertainty about whether sufficient faculty would volunteer to develop curriculum and deliver workshops in a community setting. That uncertainty proved unfounded: each college of business faculty member contacted quickly and enthusiastically agreed to participate. The Hispanic Chamber has also reported enhanced program value across its existing offerings, with Latino Leadership OKC and Women's Business Center participants expressing enthusiasm for earning University of Central Oklahoma credentials that recognize their leadership and entrepreneurial development. Hispanic Chamber staff note that the partnership has increased the organization's visibility and credibility among member businesses, with the University of Central Oklahoma relationship serving as evidence of the Hispanic Chamber's capacity to provide high-quality programming.

Discussion and Future Directions

The early outcomes described above, while necessarily preliminary, are consistent with the theoretical frameworks guiding this work and suggest several directions for interpretation, expansion, and further inquiry.

The Women's Business Center data offer perhaps the most analytically interesting early signal. An average of 4.5 badges per learner affirms the alternative credentialing literature's proposition that stackable pathways motivate continued engagement rather than one-time participation (Ha et al., 2023; see also figure 1). This is particularly notable for adult Hispanic learners who face significant time and financial constraints: the data suggest that when credentials are accessible, culturally responsive, and visibly valuable, participants invest in completing full pathways rather than treating a single credential as sufficient. Whether this pattern holds across subsequent cohorts and whether it eventually translates into measurable workforce outcomes are critical questions for longitudinal follow-up.

The outcomes described here are consistent with, though not yet sufficient to confirm, the broader proposition that sustained relational investment creates conditions that program design alone cannot replicate. The credential programs themselves are portable, but the conditions that made them possible — a decade of sustained presence, embedded personnel, board-level cross-organizational commitment, and community-identified rather than university-imposed program design — required years to build. This is the central transferability consideration for metropolitan universities seeking to learn from this case: the initiative is not primarily a program template but an illustration of what becomes structurally possible after long-term relational investment matures into a genuine institutional partnership.

The survey data, limited as they are, reinforce a design argument that runs throughout this case. The fact that all five respondents completed the instrument in Spanish and that their qualitative feedback centers on practical, community-situated business needs is consistent with the community cultural wealth framework's insistence that educational design must honor linguistic capital rather than require assimilation into English-dominant academic norms (Yosso, 2005). The Spanish-language delivery, community facilitators, and Hispanic Chamber-embedded location are not accommodations layered onto a standard program; they are structural features without which the program would not function equitably.

Similarly, the co-development process through which the program was designed reflects principles consistent with andragogical theory. Rather than arriving with a predetermined curriculum, the University of Central Oklahoma began by listening. The Hispanic Chamber identified specific competencies based on observed community needs, and faculty built

curriculum around those needs rather than around disciplinary convenience. Treating participants' existing entrepreneurial experience as prior knowledge to be built upon rather than a deficit to be remediated is consistent with both Knowles' (1984) andragogical principles and the asset-based orientation of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005).

Taken together, this case makes three contributions to existing scholarship worth stating explicitly. First, it extends anchor institution theory by demonstrating how the theory's core distinction, between passive proximity and active anchoring, maps onto a longitudinal developmental trajectory with identifiable phase transitions and enabling conditions. Prior anchor institution scholarship has largely described what active anchoring looks like at a single point in time; this case illustrates how a university moves through phases of engagement over a decade and what institutional decisions accelerate or constrain that movement. Second, it applies community cultural wealth theory in a workforce credentialing context rather than its more common application to student persistence and degree attainment, demonstrating that the framework's asset-based orientation is equally productive when examining how credential design choices honor or undermine the capital that Hispanic entrepreneurs bring to professional development settings. Third, and most distinctively, it provides evidence that the enabling conditions for credential innovation are relational and longitudinal rather than programmatic and replicable in the short term — a finding that is only visible across a decade of documentation and that shorter case studies or program evaluations cannot generate.

Several limitations constrain the interpretation of these findings. The most recent partnership was formally established in September 2025, meaning the outcome data are preliminary and the period of observation is short. Longitudinal data on workforce impact — employer recognition of credentials, business growth indicators, income changes among participants — are not yet available and will require sustained follow-up. The evidentiary base relies primarily on internal institutional documentation and a small initial survey sample (n=6), which limits independent verification and precludes generalizable conclusions. The authors' insider position as institutional participants in the partnership introduces positionality considerations that external research designs would not face, and interpretations should be read accordingly. The Business Fundamentals program's current dependence on state regents grant funding with a defined term introduces a sustainability variable that complicates direct replication, as does the University of Central Oklahoma's Carnegie classification as a professions-focused metropolitan institution, a context that facilitates faculty engagement in ways that may not hold at research-intensive universities or institutions without explicit metropolitan mission commitments.

Looking ahead, a potential future direction is the development of articulation pathways between micro-credentials and University of Central Oklahoma degree programs, though this would require faculty governance approval and careful competency mapping, processes not yet initiated. The partnership model may have potential to extend to other community organizations

serving the Hispanic community, though whether and how this occurs will depend on available resources, organizational readiness, and sustained institutional commitment. Most importantly, a formal longitudinal study tracking participants' workforce outcomes over three to five years would substantially strengthen the evidence base for the model described in this case and move the conversation from promising early indicators to rigorous assessment of impact.

Conclusion: The Power of Sustained Place-Based Partnership

The September 2025 ceremony, where President Todd G. Lamb and David Castillo signed the formal partnership agreement, symbolized far more than administrative efficiency. It represented mutual trust earned through over a decade of collaboration, shared commitment to the Hispanic community's economic mobility, and recognition that metropolitan universities serve their regions most effectively through sustained, authentic partnerships. As President Lamb stated at the signing, the University of Central Oklahoma is uniquely positioned as the state's largest metropolitan university to serve as the educational partner of choice. But positioning alone does not create transformation. Consistent action, responsive programming, and genuine collaboration do.

For metropolitan universities serving rapidly growing Hispanic populations, the question is not whether to engage but how to engage authentically and at sufficient depth. The University of Central Oklahoma's trajectory from physical presence to deep partnership to credential innovation demonstrates that the answer is not found in program design alone—it is found in the patient, sustained accumulation of relational trust, institutional commitment, and community-responsive adaptation over time. The micro-credential partnership that was formalized in September 2025 would not exist without the conference room sponsorship in 2013, the embedded directorship in 2016, or the administrative continuity that preserved the relationship through budget constraints and leadership transitions. Each phase created conditions that the next phase required.

This has direct implications for how metropolitan universities think about community engagement as an institutional strategy. Engagement that is episodic, grant-dependent, or personnel-contingent does not generate the conditions this case describes. Sustained presence, embedded roles, board-level reciprocity, and community-identified programming demand institutional commitment that surpasses and predates any individual program or funding cycle. The power of place, as this case illustrates, is not simply about geographic proximity. It is about the deliberate, long-term choice to make a community's educational and economic needs a permanent feature of an institution's strategic identity and to build the relational infrastructure that allows innovation to emerge from that commitment when the moment arrives. For institutions navigating emerging HSI trajectories, this case offers not a map but a method: show up, stay, listen, and build the conditions that programs alone cannot create.

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