

Master's Degree from Stackable Certificates

Overview

In December 2021, the Office of Academic Affairs convened a subcommittee of the Council on Academic Affairs (CAA) to examine alternative pathways for learners to demonstrate knowledge and earn credentials from Ohio State. These are summarized in the document, [Proposed framework for alternative credential offerings at Ohio State](#), submitted by Griffiths and Anthony. The current proposal offers guidelines for one such pathway, Stackable Certificates towards a Master's degree. Stackable certificates expand Ohio State's portfolio of graduate certificate categories to offer a flexible pathway to a Master's degree. These certificates are designed such that all credits meet degree requirements. As such, stackable certificates can be considered analogous to a modular Master's degree. A handful of stackable degree programs have been piloted on campus and interest in this degree pathway is strong in our colleges that have active industry partners. An increasing number of academic units including Law, Fisher College of Business, and the College of Engineering have developed certificates stackable to a Master's degree, which motivates the development of clear guidelines in support of such academic programming. This document results from meetings of a subcommittee of Graduate Council with contributions from Maria Miriti (Associate Dean for Academic Excellence, Graduate School), Lisa Kowalsky (Education Program Specialist, Graduate School), Lisa Duffy (Assistant Registrar), Rob Griffiths (Asst Vice Provost for Online Learning and Innovation), Samuel Jordan (Director Registration Services, Graduate School), and John Gray (Professor, Fisher COB).

Rationale

Certificate programs provide students an opportunity to demonstrate competence in a coherent curriculum or area of specialization. The ability to stack such certificates towards a degree offers flexibility for non-traditional learners or those already employed in the workforce to accumulate graduate credit hours while gaining marketable skills and credentials. Beginning in 2022, a limited number of stackable certificate programs have been piloted at Ohio State. These pilots have identified needs and practices to support the success of such programs including the need to allow 100% overlap between certificates and graduate programs, and the ability for students enrolled in a graduate program to pursue a stand-alone certificate. Further, there is strong interest across the university and among industry partners that such a program be formalized.

Stackable degree programs are offered at many colleges and universities throughout Ohio and the Big 10 (Table 1). Stackable certificate programs are most commonly offered online although in-person and online modalities exist across institutions. Most institutions assign advisors for students pursuing a stackable degree. Although there is not a fixed cadence for students to complete a stackable degree, students are required to be admitted and enrolled in the specific degree program prior to degree completion. During this time, students complete a culminating experience or capstone for the degree.

Table 1. List of Ohio and Big 10 institutions with stackable degree programs and their policies.

School	Policy Link
Ohio Institutions	
Baldwin Wallace University	For MBA only
Kent State University	For MBA only
Ohio University ¹	https://search.ohio.edu/s/redirect?collection=ohio-search&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.ohio.edu%2Fsites%2Fdefault%2Ffiles%2Fsites%2Ffaculty-senate%2Ffiles%2FDefinitions%2520and%2520Requirements%2520for%2520Certificate%2520Programs.pdf&auth=lvkfr81KqCWEuRAJn4iLBw&profile=_default&rank=13&query=Stackable+Certificates
Ohio Christian University	https://www.ohiochristian.edu/online-college/online-certificate-programs/
University of Cincinnati ²	https://business.uc.edu/programs-degrees/graduate/certificates.html#:~:text=A%20graduate%20certificate%20from%20the,more%20value%20to%20their%20degree*
Big 10 and Peer Institutions	
Northwestern	https://sps.northwestern.edu/graduate-certificates/
University of Illinois: Urbana-Champaign	https://giesonline.illinois.edu/explore-programs/graduate-certificates
Purdue University	https://www.purdue.edu/online/purdues-stackable-online-graduate-certificates-can-help-professionals-get-more-return-on-investment/
Rutgers	https://www.business.rutgers.edu/stackable
University of Minnesota	https://ccaps.umn.edu/human-sexuality-certificate#toc-human-sexuality-certificate
Indiana University	https://oneill.indiana.edu/online/online-certificates/index.html https://southeast.iu.edu/graduate-programs/academics/grad-certificates.html
University of Maryland ³	https://academiccatalog.umd.edu/graduate/policies/certificate-policies/
University of Washington	https://grad.uw.edu/policy_topics/stacked-degrees/
University of Texas at Austin ⁴	https://gradschool.utexas.edu/degrees-programs/stackable-certificates

¹ Policies regarding Stackable Certificates are mainly outlined in the catalogue:

[https://catalogs.ohio.edu/content.php?catoid=97&navoid=9991#:~:text=If%20the%20student%20begins%20one%20or%20more,master's%20degree%20cannot%20exceed%20eight%20\(8\)%20years](https://catalogs.ohio.edu/content.php?catoid=97&navoid=9991#:~:text=If%20the%20student%20begins%20one%20or%20more,master's%20degree%20cannot%20exceed%20eight%20(8)%20years).

² No formal University policy regarding Stackable Certificates is available at this point. Policies and certificate offerings appear to be housed mainly within the Carl H. Lindner School of Business, but certificate options seem to be varied.

³ Stackable certificate programming must be approved by a committee before they can be completed by students. Stackable certificate pathways could be combined differently by students.

⁴ This is not part of the Big10 Universities but has very well fleshed out stackable certificate document.

Policies, guidelines and process

Stackable Certificate Programs

A stackable certificate program is a program in which credits from approved certificate programs are applied to a master's degree. Students earn the master's degree after completing one or more certificates and a capstone experience. Students enrolled in stackable certificate programs are subject to policies and procedures described in the Graduate School Handbook. This section explains additional policies and procedures that apply to students enrolled in stackable-certificates-to-a-master's-degree program.

Students can pursue one of two pathways into a stackable Master's degree program, 1) apply directly to a master's degree program and pursue curriculum in line with stackable certificates, or 2) apply only to the stackable certificate program(s) and pursue the capstone at a later date upon admission into the master's degree program. Students who pursue the first pathway follow a typical Master's plan and benefit from financial aid eligibility while earning the certificates once they are completed rather than waiting until degree completion. Those who pursue the second pathway will benefit from a lower initial commitment to a graduate program while gaining a marketable credential. Although ineligible for federal financial aid, employers may cover the cost of the certificate within the regulatory limits and company policy.

Academic units are responsible for determining if certificates must be pursued in a set sequence or not. Academic units should develop clear guidelines that provide consistency and protocols to move from a stand-alone certificate into a master's degree program. This must include publicly providing content about the timing for applying to the master's program, requirements to earn a master's degree with an earned certificate from Ohio State and policies for transfer credits from other providers. (*The issue is that degree programs permit transfer credits while certificate programs do not*). Finally, academic units have the discretion to set a maximum timeline for degree completion after a candidate earns one or more stackable certificates.

Potential pathways to earning a stackable degree are presented below (Figure 1).

Pathway 1:

- 1) Students apply to a Master's program that includes a stackable pathway
- 2) Accepted students should be advised of the stackable pathway and the need to apply for the certificate if they are interested.
- 3) Students interested in receiving the stackable credential apply for the certificate program prior to course enrollment to ensure that necessary courses count towards the certificate.
- 4) Students must be enrolled for a minimum of 3 credits hours during the semester they wish to graduate.

Pathway 2:

- 1) Student applications are submitted to a stand-alone, stackable certificate program
- 2) All credits in the certificate must be accepted as credits toward the degree should the student apply to and be accepted into the degree program

- 3) Because criteria for the certificate may be different (typically less stringent) than those for the degree, admission criteria for the stand-alone certificate and the admission criteria into the master's degree during or upon completion of the certificate must be shared with the student at the time of application to the certificate and the master's degree program
- 4) Students in stand-alone certificate programs who wish to move into a master's degree program, whether during or upon completion of the stand-alone certificate, must apply to the master's degree program.
- 5) Students must be accepted into the master's degree program *no later than the semester or term immediately prior to the semester or term when they plan to graduate*
- 6) Students must be enrolled for a minimum of 3 credit hours during the semester they wish to graduate.

Capstone Experience

A stackable certificate master's program must culminate in a capstone experience, of a minimum of 3 credit hours, that is appropriate to the type of master's degree offered. For an MS or MA, a master's examination that integrates learning objectives from the certificates and mastery of the entire curriculum is required. Consistent with other master's final examinations, the master's final examination for a student pursuing the thesis option must include a written portion (thesis) and an oral portion. The master's examination for a student pursuing the non-thesis option must include a written portion and may include an oral portion. The written portion for a non-thesis master's final examination may be a substantial paper, project, or examination appropriate to the discipline, demonstrative of scholarly work and consistent with the best practices in the field. All master's final examinations are conducted with master's examination committees. See Master's Examination, section 6.2, of the Graduate Student Handbook for information on the master's examination committee.

Requirements

Stackable certificate programs should allow sufficient flexibility for the diversity of Master's degree programs offered in at Ohio State. Nevertheless, the following requirements must be met:

- Not all graduate certificates stack towards a master's degree. Stackable certificates-to-a-master's-degree programs must be approved through the university curricular process to receive a designation that the registrar can utilize to track student progress towards the master's degree.
- The Master's degree program must be on record before certificates can stack towards it.
- Stackable certificates must offer meaningful credentials on their own in terms of student marketability.
- Students must be accepted and enrolled in a graduate program prior to earning the Master's degree.
- The Master's degree must include a culminating experience consistent with the degree program.
- Students must be enrolled in a minimum of 3 credit hours during the semester they plan to graduate.

- The number of certificates that stack towards a degree is determined by the credits required for a given degree. Given that the minimum number of credit hours for a Master's degree is 30, two certificates may be a common requirement for a stackable program. For example, a stackable certificate program for a 30-credit Master's degree could be created from two 12-credit certificate programs and 6 credits of capstone or additional coursework plus capstone.
- Students who are in certificate programs must obtain course grades of B- or greater for courses to count toward the certificate, which for some programs may be stricter than their traditional graduate program.
- Credits from certificates earned outside of the approved stackable-certificates-to-a-master's-degree program are not transferable into the master's degree program.
- Advising should be in place to ensure that:
 1. Students recognize distinctions between the certificate and the degree and
 2. Students are prepared for the degree's capstone experience. This is especially true if the degree requires a research component for completion. An advisor should meet with certificate students so that they are well-mentored and prepared to complete the capstone requirement once they matriculate into the academic program.

Proposing a New Stackable Certificate Program

To propose a new stackable certificate program with an existing master's degree, follow the guidelines for proposing a graduate certificate with the following additions:

1. Describe how students will be advised about the requirements for completing a Master's degree including gpa minimums and advisor appointment.
2. Describe how students will be prepared to complete the Master's capstone experiences.
3. Explain how certificate students will be vetted for admission into the graduate program should they decide to pursue a Master's degree.

Financial Aid Considerations

As an important reminder, students solely in stand-alone certificate programs, without being enrolled in a degree program, are ineligible for federal financial aid. Thus, academic units should consider affordability of certificate programs against their return on investment benefits to learners to support diverse participation.

Figure 1. Workflow

