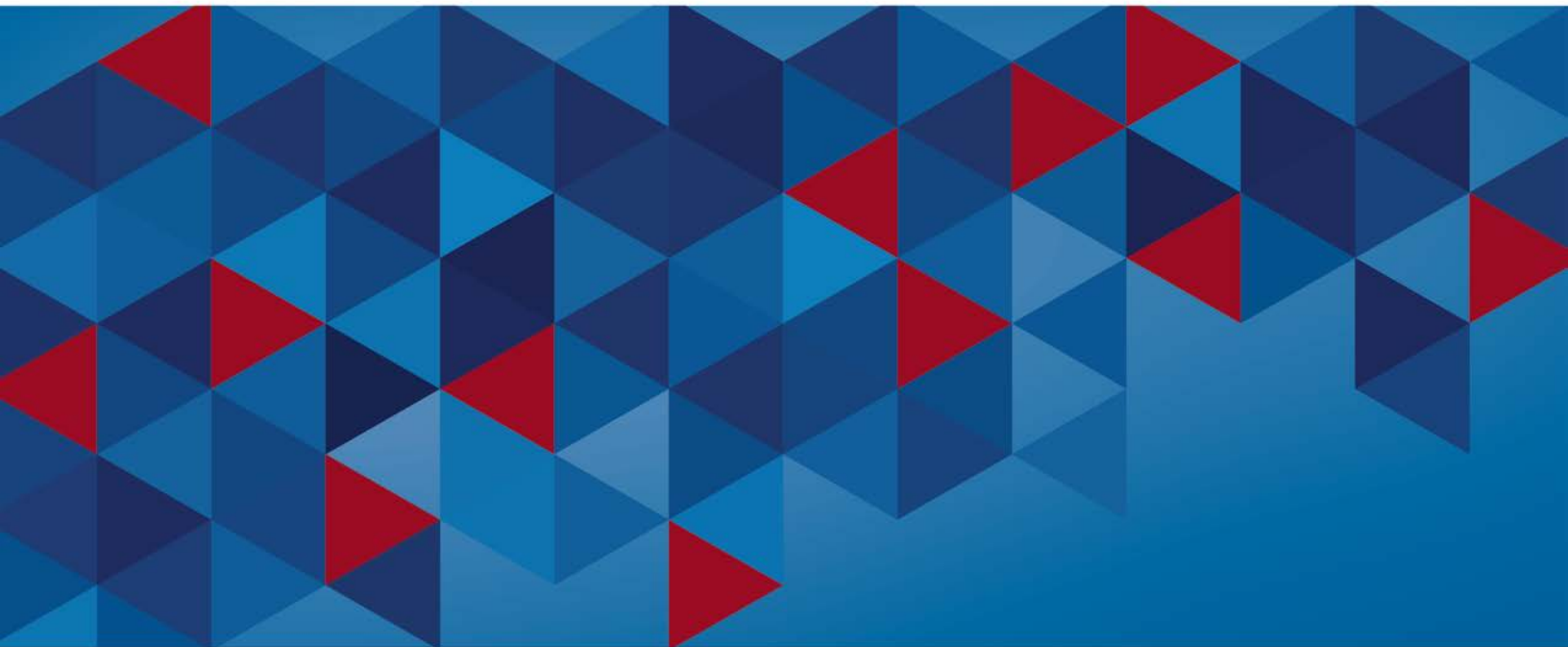# Competency-based Badging for Philanthropy Practitioners

An Initiative to Develop Competency Models and Alternative Credentials for Foundation Program Officers, Nonprofit Board Members, and Nonprofit Executive Staff

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JOHNSON CENTER
AT GRAND VALLEY STATE UNIVERSITY

GRAND VALLEY
STATE UNIVERSITY

INTRODUCTION: ALIGNING WORK AND EDUCATION TO SUPPORT A MORE DIVERSE AND INCLUSIVE SECTOR

Philanthropy has long struggled to build a diverse and inclusive workforce that truly represents the communities and populations we serve. Despite decades of effort, people of color still make up only one in 10 nonprofit leaders and one in four foundation staff (BoardSource, 2017; Council on Foundations, 2017).

A rigid hiring focus on specific academic credentials (to the exclusion of others) has contributed to stymieing progress. Philanthropy (by which we mean the entire ecosystem of nonprofits, foundations, and donors) has also traditionally privileged mission-area expertise (often tied to particular degree fields or credentials) over job-specific skills in the hiring process. As a result, topic-area knowledge runs deep, but there is a great hunger for job-specific professional education.

These practices pose a particular risk to philanthropy in the age of COVID-19. As Kevin Carey writes in *Washington Monthly,* "There has never been a crisis in American higher education like the one we are facing today" (Carey, 2020). Students and institutions alike are facing an historic public health and economic crisis that is already reshaping the ways we learn, the jobs that are available to us, and the skills workers will need to be prepared for the future. As entire industries shift in response to the pandemic, each sector – including philanthropy – must prepare to retrain and upskill workers of all backgrounds and experience levels to be successful in new roles.

Digital badges are virtual credentials that represent the accomplishments, competencies, or skills that an individual has achieved in a particular focus area. Badging presents a significant opportunity for addressing the challenge of a more diverse workforce. An alternative to traditional academic degrees, these credentials are based on clearly defined competencies, providing an opportunity to document expertise and experience.

With this context in mind, the Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy (Johnson Center) at Grand Valley State University (GVSU) is creating a competency-based badging program that will leverage professionals' existing skill sets and mitigate some of the barriers currently posed by traditional career paths and hiring requirements. This program includes:

1. The development and validation of competency models for foundation program officers, nonprofit board members, and nonprofit executive staff;

2. The structuring of a competency-based professional development and badging program, administered under the auspices of GVSU, that aligns with the competency models; and

3. The establishment of partnerships with national networks of grantmakers and nonprofits, individual organizations, institutions of higher education, and others to promote the use of these models in hiring and training practices, and to promote the availability of badges as alternative credentials.

The Johnson Center is seeking support to complete each element of this project and to provide the necessary resources to make our program available and familiar to new and veteran practitioners around the country. Thank you for your consideration.

Competency Models: Definition, Purpose, and Use

Competency models delineate the knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics (KSAOs) that are required for effective performance in a particular job or profession. Many fields/professions (e.g., human resources and social work) are already using competency models to frame and inform professional

development activities and position descriptions. By defining the KSAOs that underpin effective performance in particular jobs or professions, competency models enable program developers to design professional development activities or other offerings that support KSAO acquisition.

The competency model then guides the identification of learning objectives related to particular skills and job functions. Those learning objectives, in turn, inform the creation of a curriculum that teaches and assesses these skills and prompts behavioral changes in practitioners. Upon successful completion of the curriculum and assessment, a student earns a badge.

Data suggests that hiring candidates based on demonstrated competencies, in addition to an undergraduate degree, is a more apt indicator of potential success than the candidate's field of undergraduate study alone (Grigoryev, 2006). In other fields, experiments in using data-backed effective practices to determine who hiring staff and managers choose to interview and hire are on the rise. These evidenced-based human resource practices, which are grounded in competency modeling and analysis have led to significant increases in the diversity of staff, talent retention, and overall performance (Talent 2025 and West Michigan Works!, 2018).

One in ten U.S. workers are currently employed by the nonprofit sector, but few of those individuals hold a philanthropy-related degree (The 2019 Nonprofit Employment Report, 2019). Badging programs offer a potentially transformative opportunity to create verified and standardized professional credentials for the philanthropic workforce and those wishing to transition into the field. They can help us all create a more diverse, inclusive, and impactful field.

Moving from Competency Models to Badges

Work has already begun on our competency models for nonprofit board members and executive staff, and is nearing completion for our competency model for foundation program officers.

For each role, we intend to design a curriculum that results in "stackable" badges. The competencies identified in each model will be the foundation for curricula that ultimately result in individual badges representing proficiency over specific skill sets. In the case of program officers, for instance, a badge might indicate mastery over proposal analysis or nonprofit financial review.

When combined with other badges in the program, credentials will "stack" on top of each other to culminate in an over-arching credential. We will partner with other units within GVSU, such as the School of Public, Nonprofit, and Health Administration and the Seidman College of Business, to identify ways to combine existing, for-credit courses with Johnson Center programs to create credentials.

Example. A competency is gained by taking courses that teach specific, desired behaviors.

Johnson Center team members are already revising and refining the content of our professional development offerings for philanthropy practitioners – including courses of The Grantmaking School, workshops and trainings for nonprofits, and our online-learning platform LearnPhilanthropy Academy – to align with the competency models. We are also identifying and organizing content for the new programs we will need to offer students in order to cover the full range of relevant competencies.

In some cases, we will be able to use the same courses to train both foundation program officers and nonprofit leaders in needed skills. We are confident that these opportunities for shared learning will support a consistent approach field-wide in core concept areas, such as equitable evaluation.

Current Status: Competency Model for Foundation Program Officers

The Johnson Center began work on a competency model for Foundation Program Officers in 2018. This work was furthered by an engagement with the David and Lucille Packard Foundation to assist in developing a competency model for internal use on Strategy, Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (SMEL).

Today, our competency model for foundation program officers is nearing completion. Over the course of 2019, the Johnson Center finalized all groundwork for the model, including conducting background research; literature reviews on existing models; gathering and analyzing job descriptions; and soliciting feedback from subject matter experts (SMEs). The themes, trends, and patterns that emerged from that work served as the basis for the development of a draft model, completed in early 2020. In mid-2020, our team hosted a series of focus groups with three sets of SMEs to validate the model: 1) program officers/staff from Michigan foundations, 2) leaders from Grand Rapids-area nonprofits, and 3) program staff/officers from national foundations.

The focus groups yielded overwhelmingly positive feedback on the content and structure of the model. The model is now in the final stages of refinement based on these activities and will be rolled out to the public in stages beginning in Fall 2020, culminating in the release of the full model in Winter/Spring 2021.

Current Status: Competency Model of Nonprofit Boards and Executive Staff

A number of competency models and frameworks related to nonprofit leadership currently exist. At the Johnson Center, however, we have carved out a niche as experts in nonprofit board governance, capacity building, and the facilitation of strategic working relationships between organizations' executive staff and board members. We are currently leveraging over a decade's worth of experience in this space, as well as an expansive national network of colleagues in nonprofit management, to develop competency models for nonprofit board members and executive staff.

We learned a great deal from the experience of developing our competency model for foundation program officers. As a result, we are able to move these next models along toward completion much more rapidly. We anticipate having a draft model of competencies for nonprofit board members and one for nonprofit executive staff by the end of 2020. Both sets of competencies will be presented to groups for validation during the fourth quarter of 2020 or first quarter of 2021 (depending on participant and facilitator schedules), with a final model available before summer 2021.

Field-Building to Support the Broad Adoption of Competency Models

The Johnson Center will engage in field-building to support the wider adoption of competency models and digital badges as key elements of philanthropy's efforts to promote equity and an inclusive workforce. In Michigan, we will partner with the Michigan Nonprofit Association and Council of Michigan Foundations to pilot and refine these strategies. We will establish these same partnerships with national organizations to promote and build capacity and support in the field for badging. We will use a multi-pronged, multi-channel approach to accomplish this goal, including direct outreach, published articles and thought pieces, webinars, conference presentations, and the inclusion and highlighting of resources on our website, JohnsonCenter.org.

Resource Needs

The Johnson Center is seeking two years of support for this project. The cost to complete the work necessary to launch a robust, valid, and useful badging program is anticipated to be approximately $300,000. We are seeing $100,000 at this time for the first year of work.

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About the Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy

The Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy at Grand Valley State University was established in 1992 with support from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. Our mission is to be a global leader in helping individuals and organizations understand, strengthen, and advance philanthropy, resulting in a smart, adaptive sector that helps create strong, inclusive communities.

We put research to work with and for professionals across the country and the world. Through professional education offerings; research, evaluation, and consulting services; and bold thinking to advance the field, we support a philanthropic ecosystem defined by effective philanthropy, strong nonprofits, and informed community change.

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