

# A Columbia University dean says professionals need these three alternative credentials beyond a bachelor's degree to stand out in the job market

Robin Madell 5 minutes ago





**Dr. Jason Wingard, dean of Columbia University School of Professional Studies, believes that alternative credentials are of value to students as well as employees and more experienced job seekers.** Courtesy of Jason Wingard

- **Dr. Jason Wingard is the dean of Columbia University School of Professional Studies and the author of books including "Learning to Succeed: Rethinking Corporate Education in a World of Unrelenting Change" and the anticipated "The Future of Work: Optimizing the Talent Pipeline."**

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- **Dr. Wingard believes that there are three alternative credentials, beyond a bachelor's degree, that can be immensely helpful for professionals to stay competitive.**

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- **These include digital badges, non-degree programs, and competency-based education. He suggested several ways job seekers can find these offerings.**

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- **Having these credentials allow job seekers and employees alike to keep their skills fresh for any changes that can happen in the job market.**

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Is it time to move beyond the bachelor's degree when it comes to credentials that help you to succeed in the real world? According to the dean of [Columbia University School of Professional Studies \(SPS\)](#), the answer is a definite yes.

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Dr. Jason Wingard — who in addition to his role as dean is also the author of books including "[Learning to Succeed: Rethinking Corporate Education in a World of Unrelenting Change](#)" and the anticipated "[The Future of Work: Optimizing the Talent Pipeline](#)" — believes that to compete in the future workplace, alternative credentials and skill sets will become increasingly critical over the next decade.

"The workplace of today is swiftly evolving, and for job applicants to compete for sought-after positions, they will need to differentiate themselves in more contemporary and effective ways," Wingard explained in an interview with Business Insider. "As roles become more niche, the skills needed to succeed, in turn, become more specialized."

The Columbia dean believes that alternative credentials are crucial

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"They allow [these groups] to stay relevant in the evolving professional landscape and communicate their expertise in new ways," said Wingard.

Wingard emphasized that within academia, evidence is emerging of targeted expertise being even more valued than general knowledge. As a proof point, the dean pointed to something that he and his colleagues have witnessed at Columbia: growing interest from students in joining non-degree programs so they can access the specialized knowledge to launch or advance in their careers.



**Dr. Jason Wingard is the author of "Learning to Succeed: Rethinking Corporate Education in a World of Unrelenting Change."** Courtesy of Jason Wingard

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"Whatever that job is and whatever the requirements are, whoever can do it best is going to be able to have that job," said Wingard. "Workers must have and possess the required competencies to thrive. Those abilities change rapidly, so they have to be able to adjust and upscale very quickly."



How can students, job seekers, and employees prepare themselves now to achieve that tall order, thus safeguarding their future career relevance? An effective way, advised Wingard, is through first acquiring — and then communicating with prospective employers about — alternative credentials.

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A recent [Pearson study](#) of 190 institutions of higher education found that non-credit training courses or programs were the most popular alternative credential offered at schools (70%), followed by non-credit certificate programs (63%) and graduate credit certificate programs (61%).

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Below are three alternative credentials, beyond a bachelor's degree, that Wingard recommends you begin to leverage today in order to stand out in the uber-competitive career marketplace. "As many employers prioritize the traditional degree, these examples may play a larger role in matching professionals to their desired occupations in the near-term (versus long-term) future," said Wingard.

## **Earn digital badges that can be shared on social media or in an email signature**

[HASTAC](#) (Humanities, Arts, Science, and Technology Alliance and Collaboratory) defines a digital badge as "a validated indicator of accomplishment, skill, quality, or interest that can be earned in many learning environments."

These online depictions of student learnings are usually illustrated by way of icons, signaling to prospective employers the skills that learners have obtained through short courses, online learning, or traditional higher education. Wingard emphasized that because digital badges can be shared on social media, in email signatures, on websites, and via other online forums, this alternative credential is well suited to boosting applicants' presence with hiring managers and recruiters.

"As most correspondence between job seekers and employers is conducted online, digital badges allow for a more seamless and natural way [for candidates] to sell themselves to employers," said Wingard. "Employers merely need to click on an icon to obtain the applicant's credentials versus needing to comb through bullets on a traditional resume."

**"As most correspondence between job seekers and employers is conducted online, digital badges allow for a more seamless and natural way [for candidates] to sell themselves to employers," said Wingard.** Courtesy of Jason Wingard

There's still a long way to go to achieve critical mass, however.

Currently, only one in five educational institutions offer digital badges, according to Pearson's study. Pearson reports that digital badges are most commonly offered in association with non-credit training courses or programs, and within the small slice of schools that do award credentials, 36% use the institution's brand or system of credentialing.

One example of how [students](#) and [professionals](#) alike can get started in the emerging world of digital badging is through membership with information management membership organization [ARMA](#). Through a partnership with [Credly](#), ARMA offers their members the opportunity to earn and share digital badges as credentials.

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As shared on the ARMA site, here's how it works:

- Within six weeks of earning a credential, you'll receive an email notification from the ARMA Digital Credentialing System that you have earned a digital badge.
- When you click the "Get Started" button, you'll be asked to create an account on ARMA.
- Once your ARMA account is created, the platform will add your badge to your profile, which you can then add on social media, email signatures, etc.

LinkedIn also offers several digital "verified skill badges" or "Skill Assessments" that signal specific expertise to potential employers, allowing candidates to differentiate themselves without necessarily needing a degree. The site states that LinkedIn is currently "testing and evaluating" this feature, so far only offering assessments

categorized as "tech, general, and other skills," but more may become available in the future. (You can read more about LinkedIn Skill Assessments [here](#).)

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The Columbia dean predicts that down the road, digital badges could eventually replace traditional credentials like a bachelor's degree. "As the value proposition of traditional higher education is declining, fewer students are seeking traditional degrees," said Wingard. "But they still need a way to signal their skills to employers, and digital badges are a way to do that."

## Close the skills gap with non-degree programs

Non-degree programs are the second alternative credential that Wingard highlighted. He explained that these sometimes take the form of certificate programs and can help "solve the skills-gap problem" for students and employers alike.

"For students, [non-degree programs] provide a way to gain practical, in-demand technical skills that will lead to a well-paying job," he said. "Traditional higher education often fails to graduate students with the skills employers need, and non-degree programs, which may be tailored to the [business] need, fill that gap."



Wingard noted that non-degree programs not only allow participants to enhance their knowledge in a specific/niche area of subject matter, but these programs also offer students access to thought leaders who are on the cutting edge of their fields, versus traditional professors who may only work within academia.

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As an example of a non-degree program that can help students boost their skills, Wingard pointed to the Columbia SPS [Business Certification Program](#), which he explained is rapidly gaining in popularity. "We have over a hundred students a year earning their Advanced Graduate Certificate in Business or Certification of Professional Achievement in Business since we began offering these post-baccalaureate programs," Wingard stated.

Students may choose from among 20 graduate-level business courses and customize their curriculum to meet specific goals and advance their careers. "Program participants learn from scholar-practitioner faculty members who are leaders in their fields and may choose from flexible options including on-campus, online, full, or part-time," he added.

## **Increase your employability with competency-based education**

Wingard identified competency-based education (CBE) as the third leg of the stool. CBE allows students to earn educational credentials faster and at a lower cost than degree-based competencies.

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[Pearson](#) describes the "student-centered, accelerated approach" of CBE as a "new model in education that uses learning, not time, as the metric of student success," noting that the method "redefines traditional credit-based requirements" by emphasizing competencies derived from the skills that employers value the most.

"CBE programs focus on real-world skills that employers need, leading to better employability for learners," said Wingard.  
"Credentials are based on the skills acquired."

The structure of CBE programs can vary widely, from those based on group instruction involving in-class time, to self-paced instructional programs, to programs where the learner's skills are directly assessed without regard to classroom time of credit hours.

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Wingard highlighted the [Google IT Support Professional Certificate](#) as a good example of a valuable CBE program. Google's five-course certificate is hosted on the [Coursera](#) platform, which partners with universities to offer courses online. On the Coursera site, the opportunity is described as a "launchpad to a career in IT ... designed to take beginner learners to job readiness in under six months." The site also suggests that by committing about five hours

per week to the course's combination of "video lectures, quizzes, and hand-on labs and widgets," students can complete the certification in that tight timeframe.

As reported in [Inside HigherEd](#), "Google is confident that the certificate will help people who earn it land jobs, in part because of the power of the company's brand, with the thinking being that if it's good enough for one of the world's largest tech companies, many others will buy in to the certificate's value."

The tech giant sweetened the deal by forming a consortium of large employers — including Bank of America, Walmart, and Sprint — who are ready and waiting to hire those who complete the Google certificate.

The reality of it is that "a [growing number] of higher education institutions [are] embracing alternative credentials, such as digital certifications, and those that don't risk becoming more disconnected with the needs of their students," Wingard concluded.

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