GSU+ Project Narrative  
Georgia State University

Need

The GSU+ platform promises to resolve several problems plaguing higher education, including soaring student loan debt, ratcheting credentialism, skill deficits identified by employers, and the tenuous credibility of nontraditional education. The first three can be distilled into a single problem of transparency. The last is what we call the problem of warranted suspicion.

First, let us consider the problem of transparency. While it is understood that college credentials contribute to increased average lifetime earnings potential, the rising costs of education and accompanying loan debt are making less certain the value of traditional degrees.¹ The debt problem is especially bad for graduates of community colleges or people who do not complete their degrees, since these individuals are more likely to find it difficult to sustain payments on even modest loans.² To make matters worse, employers continue to bemoan graduates’ lack of necessary skills and have responded by ratcheting up the baseline credentials required for good jobs, increasing costs for students.³ We believe that these interconnected problems boil down to a lack of effective communication about what knowledge and skills students need as well as what students need to do to develop and demonstrate necessary competencies. GSU+ will facilitate this communication.⁴

In addition to addressing the problem of transparency, GSU+ also promises to overcome what we are calling the problem of warranted suspicion. Faculty, students, and the public are right to be suspicious of nontraditional credentials and delivery methods. While laws are changing and loopholes are closing, predatory for-profit and open-admission colleges have fanned the flames of the student debt crisis and exacerbated rather than solved the problem of ratcheting credentials.⁵ To ensure quality while still embracing an open-access mission, GSU+ will lean on the established reputation of Georgia State faculty and staff, the business acumen of major area employers, and the passion of local community organizations to develop real opportunities for students. Local partnerships, transparency, and real job opportunities will be key to increasing confidence in nontraditional business models across higher education.

Related to overcoming warranted student suspicion about nontraditional higher education, GSU+ also seeks to overcome faculty skepticism regarding the quality of online education. According to a recent survey, "Only 28.0% of chief academic officers say that their faculty members accept the 'value and legitimacy of online education,' a rate substantially the same as it was in 2003."⁶ We believe that inspired faculty are the foundation of a quality higher

⁴ The GSU+ platform will make it clear for students what courses, badges, and certificates have been endorsed by what employers, as well as the estimated time to completion of credentials, the associated costs, and any connections to concrete job opportunities.
education, and, accordingly, we make them central to the design and assessment of GSU+ courses and programs. More than simply acting as subject matter experts who package content and remotely assess students, we believe that faculty should be able and encouraged to support and challenge students as they try on, overlay, and test disciplinary lenses against their own insights and experiences. This kind of relationship requires frequent check-ins and conversations, as well as a bird’s eye view of students’ programs of study, their motivations for participation, their backgrounds, and the needs of stakeholders who have helped shaped the GSU+ courses and credentials. The GSU+ platform will enable all of this, thereby establishing more trust in online and nontraditional models of higher education.

**Value**

GSU+ will benefit the following stakeholders.

- **Students** – Using up-to-date information from employers and precise estimates of cost and duration, GSU+ students will be able to make wise investments in their higher education.

- **Parents** – Because GSU+ curricula are dynamic and responsive to the needs of local employers, parents who want to provide their children opportunity-opening higher education will be able to make targeted investments scaled precisely to desired outcomes.

- **Coaches/Advisors/Faculty** – The short duration of GSU+ microcourses offers many data collection moments, all of which can be used to offer timely and targeted support.

- **Faculty** – The distilled, focused, and dynamic nature of GSU+ microcourses will offer faculty opportunities to do more than “cover” information, freeing them to help students try on disciplinary lenses and apply new insights to address authentic problems and develop marketable skills.

- **Employers and Community Members** – Through their influence on microcourse curricula, employers and community leaders can be confident that GSU+ graduates will possess the kinds of skills and knowledge they need. The GSU+ microcourse model will also allow employers to more effectively target and build professional development experiences for their staff.

**Description**

GSU+ is a stackable credentials platform that can complement, extend, or act as a substitute for existing degree-credit programs at Georgia State University. The platform's heart and soul is a large collection of microcourses – online, at-your-own-pace, one-credit student engagements – designed through collaborations among GSU faculty and staff, Atlanta-area employers, and other community stakeholders. When students enroll in the GSU+ platform, they complete an eHarmony-like questionnaire. Data from this survey, along with any other available student records, feed a Netflix-like advisement engine that suggests microcourses, badges, and certificates connected to students’ aims and interests. As students complete their courses, the advisement engine also presents estimated time/cost-to-completion for courses and credentials, connects students to their GSU+ success coaches and faculty, and responds to course-completion data by suggesting related microcourses, badges, and certificates. Also, as students work their way toward their GSU+ certifications, they have the opportunity to share evidence of their new skills, abilities, and experiences with potential employers, community groups, and other stakeholders via GSU’s online portfolio platform.
The Microcourse Development Process

Through conversations, surveys, listening sessions, and working groups, GSU+ staff will connect with employers, faculty, and community members to map knowledge and skills required across jobs, disciplines, and community endeavors. Several prominent employers and community groups will have representatives on the GSU+ advisory board, ensuring the continued relevance of curricula.

GSU’s Center for Instructional Innovation will provide a toolset and design support for the creation of five kinds of interconnected microcourses.

- Topics – Quick but deep, authentic, concrete, and timely overviews and applications of core (inter)disciplinary insights.
- Problems – Engagements with problems without obvious solutions, helping students frame questions, gather evidence, and apply disciplinary insights to make arguments, develop solutions, and make pitches.
- Skills – Challenges that encourage students to develop and demonstrate skills that employers and community groups say they need.
- Experiences – Opportunities to participate in and reflect on community service projects, cultural events, shadowing or small-scale internships, or other experiential learning opportunities suggested by stakeholders.
- Capstone – Gateways to “level up” in a degree program or fulfill end-of-certificate requirements.

The Student Experience

Admission to GSU+ is open to everyone, and participation in self-paced GSU+ microcourses can begin immediately. Once GSU+ students decide to get started, they complete a survey and gain access to the advising platform. Students can then browse available microcourses, badges, and certificates by topic, author, or endorsement. When students settle on where to start, they can purchase single microcourses, badge or certificate bundles, or begin a monthly or annual all-you-can-learn subscriptions. As students work through their courses, they complete self-paced modules and exercises, meet online with their success coach, get feedback on assignments from GSU+ instructors, connect with a network of peers with similar interests, and begin building their online portfolio. Along the way, the GSU+ platform presents a heads-up display of estimated time/cost-to-completion, continues to survey students, and offers up-to-date course suggestions. If student engagement wanes or the quality of work fails to demonstrate competency, then a success coach and/or instructor intervenes to offer support. Prior to completion of a badge or certificate, each student works with a faculty member to design a custom final project assignment to demonstrate new skills and knowledge, a project that, once completed, will be meaningful to the both the student and to stakeholders who might view that student’s portfolio. During this capstone course, instructors provide feedback on student work. Once completed, the students’ success coaches make sure that project descriptions and media are effectively presented within the portfolio platform and are visible to potential employers.

7 Students seeking to integrate GSU+ certificates or coursework into a GSU degree-credit program will need to eventually be admitted as actual Georgia State University students. This will require adherence to GSU’s standard admissions timetable.
**Finances and Business Model**

Our business model spreadsheet has been included with this application, offering cost and revenue breakdowns and projections. However, a few key points warrant mention here. Initial investments from GSU and local employers will be required to begin development of GSU+ microcourses. Early microcourse development efforts will target employee development programs in an attempt to secure an ongoing GSU+ subscription base and build lasting relationships with employer partners. Microcourses will be open for anyone to take, and students may choose from a variety of pricing options, ranging from $199 for a single one-credit microcourse to $4990 for an annual all-you-can-learn subscription. To keep costs low, where possible, open educational resources will be used as a backbone of microcourse content, and GSU’s existing suite of e-course production and delivery tools will be used. Over time, profits will be invested in the development of a fully functional GSU+ advisement engine. Once completed, GSU+ will be able to power not only professional development programs but also continuing education, online degree, and enrichment programs. We expect the GSU+ platform to be fully functional by the end of Year 5.

**Key Assumptions**

We assume that there is community interest in nontraditional, small-scale engagements in higher education. Situated in a major metropolitan area, and given the rise of interest in nontraditional provision of higher education (coding bootcamps, MOOCs, online training, etc.), we feel confident that GSU+ will be a leader in this burgeoning nontraditional higher education market.

Next, we are assuming that we will receive support from key groups across campus, including the registrar, financial aid, disability services, student services, our provost, our president, deans and department chairs, and other administrators. Given early conversations with our Director of Distance Education, Dean of the Online College at Georgia Perimeter College (GPC) (GSU is merging with GPC), department heads from a variety of disciplines, and comments from the Dean of GSU’s new Access College, Associate Provost of Student Services, and President, we are sure that we have the internal administrative support necessary to make GSU+ a reality.\(^8\)

Lastly, we are counting on area employers working with us to establish employment pipelines and professional development programs. Early conversations with Turner Broadcasting and State Farm have been very encouraging, and we look forward to contacting other area employers, such as AT&T, Delta, Home Depot, and Coca Cola. Also, we are currently in early conversations with McKinsey & Company about possibly connecting to or supporting their Generation Initiative.\(^9\)

**Impact**

We aim to solve both the problem of transparency and the problem of warranted suspicion described above. Regarding the first, we will calculate the cost, accumulated debt, and time required for GSU+ students to enter a benefits-conferring job, paying particular attention to

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\(^8\) “[GSU President Mark Becker] said he foresees the 'Amazonification of higher education'...’We’re not there yet,’ Becker said. But his goal is for the university to give tens of thousands of students just what they need, and just when they need it. He calls it ‘personalizing, at scale.’” ([https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2015/10/01/georgia-state-u-a-hotbed-of-growth-and-innovation/](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2015/10/01/georgia-state-u-a-hotbed-of-growth-and-innovation/)) GSU+ provides a platform to facilitate this “Amazonification.”

\(^9\) [http://www.mckinsey.com/about_us/what_we_do/generation](http://www.mckinsey.com/about_us/what_we_do/generation)
data connected to students eligible for Pell Grants. These data will be compared with data connected to GSU students who earn 2-year or 4-year degrees. Moreover, to see if we are able to close the skills gap, we will survey employer partners on the job readiness of GSU+ graduates. Finally, related to trust in nontraditional models of higher education, we will survey faculty before, during, and after the launch of GSU+ to assess the degree to which they see value in both online education and in nontraditional higher education certificates.