



Opening new pathways into property management: How Cal State Fullerton began offering live IREM® Skill Badges to its students

Overview

In 2023, California State University, Fullerton (CSUF) and the Institute of Real Estate Management (IREM) partnered to launch a first-of-its-kind initiative: Offering IREM Skill Badge courses live and in person to university students. What began as an experiment has grown into a model for how higher education and industry associations can work together to prepare the next generation of real estate leaders.



The challenge: Increasing exposure to property management careers

The Real Estate Association of CSUF (REA) serves a large and growing population of real estate–focused students, approximately 100 active members within the College of Business and Economics. Despite exposure to many sectors of real estate, students historically had limited understanding of property management as a career path.

According to IREM instructor Shannon Alter, CPM®, the need was clear: "Students were interested in real estate but had little awareness of the breadth of opportunities—especially property management. Many didn't yet have the language or industry knowledge to present themselves confidently to employers."

At the same time, CSUF was seeking additional ways to differentiate its real estate students in a competitive job market while exposing them to meaningful, resume-worthy professional development.

The solution: Bring industry credentials directly to campus

IREM offers 14 Skill Badges: Short, focused courses that offer foundational knowledge in core competency areas such as leasing, marketing, budgeting, and maintenance. Skill Badges are currently available as self-paced courses via irem.org.

Alter approached IREM staff with a question: Could these be taught live to students?

The answer became a breakthrough.

IREM worked with Alter and her CSUF partners to adapt the curriculum, expand discussion sections, and convert self-paced online modules into full one-day instructor-led courses. With courses provided through the Center for Real Estate, CSUF became the first university in the nation to offer Skill Badges live and exclusively for its students.

Implementation

Since Fall 2023, CSUF students earned 68 Skill Badges through these in-person, one-day Skill Badge courses:

- Leasing (offered twice)
- Budgeting
- Marketing (offered twice)
- Maintenance

Skill Badge classes are held on Fridays to align with CSUF's schedule, when fewer academic courses meet and many students have greater flexibility. Students register directly through IREM using a dedicated sign-up link.

Enrollment fluctuated by semester, workload, and competing commitments, ranging from 7 to 20 students per class.

Why students participate

Students quickly recognized the value of earning industry-recognized credentials before graduation.

"I completed both the Leasing and the Marketing Skill Badges this semester with Shannon, and they were my first IREM courses. They had a direct impact on my confidence and preparation for job interviews, especially because I was interviewed by CIP Real Estate, the Irvine Company, and the Renken Company last week. Having the Skill Badges on my resume helped me stand out and contributed to me getting those initial calls to interview.

The courses also translated clearly to real building operations. Learning about leasing pipelines, renewals, tenant retention strategies, and coordinated marketing efforts helped me understand how these functions fit into day-to-day operations for office and industrial properties. It allowed me to speak more knowledgeably in those interviews about how operational decisions impact a building's performance and tenant experience.

Most importantly, the courses helped me understand the wide range of career paths within real estate and property management. Before taking them, I didn't realize how interconnected leasing, operations, marketing, and asset management truly are. Now I have a much clearer picture of where I want to grow long term, and these Skill Badges played a big part in that."

- Edwin Muñoz
MBA Finance Candidate



"Students don't usually have extensive resumes yet.

A Skill Badge gives them something concrete to point to—evidence of initiative, industry interest, and relevant knowledge."

- Shannon Alter, CPM®
IREM Instructor
Leaders Exceed, LLC



Results: Greater awareness, preparedness, and engagement

The initiative has generated a measurable ripple effect across CSUF's real estate community:

1. Increased awareness or career options and improved confidence

Students are now familiar with leasing principles, maintenance operations, budgeting fundamentals, and more—concepts they can draw upon in interviews and first jobs.

2. Early traction on IREM certifications

At least one student has already begun the CPM track, and another has completed criteria for the CCIM designation before graduation.

3. Stronger engagement with IREM

More CSUF students than ever before are applying for IREM Student Leader roles, joining local chapter events, and being mentored by industry professionals.

4. Visibility for the industry and the university

One of Alter's recent LinkedIn posts about the program gained more than 4,000 impressions, highlighting student success and drawing attention to the value of IREM credentials.

5. A pathway for expansion

Based on early success, CSUF plans to offer the full ACoM track, including the Ethics course, over five consecutive Fridays beginning February to March 2026. With IREM's support, the university also hopes to invite students from nearby universities with real estate programs—such as UC Irvine, Chapman University, and Fullerton College.



Student feedback

Similar to sentiments shared by Muñoz above, students consistently report:

- Feeling more prepared for interviews
- Understanding how classroom concepts translate into real building operations
- Appreciating early access to industry mentors
- Gaining clarity on career paths within property management

Looking ahead

CSUF and IREM view this model as scalable. Chapters in other regions, including San Antonio, have expressed interest in replicating the partnership.

With demand for skilled property managers steadily rising, bringing industry education directly to campuses may play a vital role in building the profession's future talent pipeline.

Key takeaways

- Live IREM Skill Badges fill a critical knowledge gap for university-level real estate students.
- Early professional development improves employability and sparks interest in management careers.
- Partnerships between universities and industry associations can increase awareness of property management as a viable, rewarding field.
- The CSUF program is a blueprint for other academic institutions.

► Contact irempartners@irem.org to explore a similar model on your campus or at your company.