Digital Badges

Scenario

Every year after graduation at Wyandotte State University, Provost Marie Brannon reflects broadly on the just-completed academic year. One thing that strikes her this year is the rate of growth in the institution's alternative credentials, aided in no small measure by the expanding ecosystem of digital badges. Badges are quickly evolving from tokens that recognize specific tasks or activities into sophisticated indicators of a learner's mastery of skills and acquisition of knowledge, and students now avidly seek opportunities to earn badges.

Wyandotte State has developed several dozen interdisciplinary microcredentials on topics including leadership, diversity, teamwork, communications, and other skills for personal and professional development. Many are one-credit courses, while others are based on seminars, both in person and online. Completion of each microcredential results in a digital badge. All of Wyandotte's badges conform to the Open Badges standard and include metadata about the underlying coursework and how it was assessed. Students can display their digital badges on social and professional networks and can share them as part of applications for internships, graduate programs, or employment.

Medical students, for example, can take several optional courses focused on health care leadership, earning a badge for each course. Those badges, along with badges for microcredentials in communication and mentoring, can be bundled to earn a certificate in leadership excellence. Meanwhile, undergraduates can earn a badge that documents skills in global collaboration gained through completion of collaborative online international learning (COIL) courses or study abroad.

After some initial reluctance, most faculty have come to see badges as a means for Wyandotte students to demonstrate expertise in areas that are not reflected in transcripts and diplomas issued for conventional courses and programs. Moreover, some local employers have partnered with the university to develop criteria for badges that will help their employees develop new skills.

Brannon expects that Wyandotte State will continue to develop educational offerings and programs that reward learners with digital badges. The university is investigating a program that would allow Wyandotte and other institutions to recognize one another's badges and credit them toward certificates or even degrees. Knowing that learners will need to hone their skills over their careers, she sees abundant opportunity for the university to develop new channels for working professionals to continue their learning and document that learning through digital badges.

1 What is it?

Digital badges are validated indicators of an "accomplishment, skill, quality, or interest that can be earned in many learning environments." In higher education, badges are becoming the preferred way to recognize microcredentials, units of study that focus on particular skills or competencies. Badges represent microcredentials in the way that a diploma represents a degree. Badges can contain rich metadata, embedded by the issuer, that enables third parties such as employers to verify the achievement that the badge represents and helps earners articulate what they have learned. Increasingly, badges conform to—and badge systems are certified for—the Open Badges standard from IMS Global Learning Consortium to ensure transparency and portability. The standard verifies the identities of the learner and the issuing institution, confirms the badge's validity as a measure of specific learning and the criteria on which it is based, and enables the badge and its metadata to be widely shared. At many institutions, badges are stackable, meaning that as badges are earned, the underlying credentials can be credited toward an advanced badge, a certificate, or a degree.

2 How does it work?

Badges answer three questions: who did something, what did they do, and who says they did it? Badges often represent competencies not shown on a transcript, such as expertise in communicating complex scientific information, agility in a particular software solution, or project management skills. Paths to earning a badge differ. At some institutions, learners may take a course—for credit or not for credit—to gain knowledge or a skill that leads to the awarding of a badge. Elsewhere, a student might present evidence of learning a specific skill for evaluation for a badge by an instructor. Badges can document a learner's progress during an academic program or may be acquired separately, perhaps as a tool to help graduating students show employers they are ready for the workplace. The criteria for earning a badge and rubrics that assess whether a learner has met those criteria might be established by an instructor, a college or university, a university system, or a national association. Corporations use badges as a tool for recognizing staff development and training. Vendor solutions can help design and deliver badges.

Digital Badges

3 Who's doing it?

A 2016 study of 190 four-year institutions by the University Professional and Continuing Education Association (UPCEA) found that 94 percent were issuing some form of alternative credentials; digital badges are increasingly used to recognize some of these new forms of credentials. Colorado State University offers badges in a range of topics. Institutions in the State University of New York System offer a variety of microcredentials—often recognized by digital badges, such as those offered at the University of Buffalo—under a system-wide policy that focuses on academic rigor, innovation, and microcredentials that can stack to certificates and degrees. The University of Maine sponsors the Engaged Black Bear initiative, a badge program for student engagement, leadership, and extended learning. Sponsored by the University System of Maryland, the Badging Essential Skills for Transitions (B.E.S.T.) initiative seeks to help employers understand learners' abilities in eight essential career-ready skills, including collaboration, communication, critical thinking, leadership, and problem solving. Largely as part of its ePortfolios with Evidence-Based Badges (E2B2) initiative, the University of Notre Dame offers a breadth of digital badges. Wichita State University offers badges with a focus on workforce training and continuing education. IBM uses badges extensively to recognize skills and achievements inside and outside its organization and as a strategy for upskilling its workforce.

4 Why is it significant?

Badges capture evidence of learning that is not available in traditional academic records. For example, badges can document learning that takes place outside traditional classrooms, such as skills gained through internships, volunteer work, and other co-curricular activities. As a complement to conventional certificates and diplomas, badges help students understand their experiences and translate them into the skills employers seek. Badges also help employers understand specific skills that a prospective employee offers. Earning badges enables students from different backgrounds and with different academic goals to tailor their educational pathways and might motivate students to complete a certificate or degree program. For learners looking to upskill or reskill to meet professional goals, badges can provide evidence of field-specific training in a particular area.

5 What are the downsides?

Many types and definitions of badges exist, which can create confusion about the credentials that badges represent, especially if the metadata behind each badge isn't clear. Not all badges adhere to the Open Badges standard and the protections it affords regarding portability; this could have negative implications if an issuer were to go out of business. Standards for academic oversight vary, forcing earners to seek high-quality microcredentials that use courses from existing registered programs and/or for which the issuer is transparent about the development process. Some academics and employers do not treat badges seriously, and some administrators and faculty still see them as a threat to traditional degree programs. Although corporations are coming to use badges in hiring, more work is needed to help employers understand, value, and adopt badges more consistently and broadly.

6 Where is it going?

Recent evidence suggests growing acceptance among employers of badges as a means to evaluate potential employees. Some believe that further development in this area will hinge on two factors: the ability of institutions to align educational programming with business needs, and further development of standards for the use of badges. More institutions of higher education will partner with employers to design badges explicitly relevant to the needs of the workforce. Work continues on an interoperable standards-based ecosystem of learner-centered digital credentials that includes badges and comprehensive learner records, and interest is growing in the assessment of badges. As work progresses, concerns may surface about the effort required for colleges and universities to develop and maintain a badging program. Deeper questions may also arise, including how the growing acceptance of badges and the microcredentials they represent could affect traditional models for how higher education is delivered and funded.

7 What are the implications for teaching and learning?

Badges have the potential to link learning from curricular, co-curricular, and work experiences to the skills needed for the 21st-century workplace. Badges can help students focus more intentionally on what they are learning and why, and they can help create opportunities for more customized learning experiences. Supporting student employability by aligning learner achievements with professional competencies and industry standards, badges can address concerns that employees lack the right skills for workplace success. As an integral part of an ecosystem where a learner can be recognized for discrete skills, competencies, and learning achievements through verifiable digital credentials, badges hold the potential to help transform where and how learning is valued.