Career Readiness Resources

USM Digital Badging Initiative
Courtesy of Towson University
USM Digital Badging Initiative
As of April 2016

The William E. Kirwan Center for Academic Innovation is working collaboratively with several University System of Maryland (USM) institutions to design, develop, and explore the feasibility of digital badging as a way to validate and better communicate our graduates’ career-ready skills.

We believe that making these badges available to students will 1) motivate them to pursue the kinds of opportunities that will help them become “career-ready,” 2) help them translate their experiences into the higher-order skills employers seek, and 3) differentiate them in a competitive marketplace. Over time, we believe these badges might also help the USM communicate better to employers what our students know and are able to do and help employers make better hires by improving fit and match between our students and their jobs.

Our immediate is to develop a “constellation” of career-ready badges for testing as a proof of concept during the 2016-17 academic year at each of the participating USM institutions: Coppin State University, Frostburg State University, Towson University, University of Maryland Baltimore County, University of Maryland University College, and the University of Baltimore.

Why Career-Ready Skills?

The transitions that students make from education to employment can be fraught with uncertainty, poor communication, and inefficiencies. Students have difficulty articulating their knowledge, skills, and abilities in their resumes and online profiles, and their evidence of learning from academic activities often does not “translate” into employment processes. Employers often do not understand what is included in credentials; they then make assumptions about what certain credentials mean, and what graduates should know and be able to do. Improved communication about the competencies that are included in credentials can help to address these problems for students, academic institutions, and employers [emphasis added].

-- ACE, Communicating the Value of Competencies (2016)

Colleges and universities are increasingly being challenged to justify the value of their degrees and credentials. Surveys consistently reveal that employers are not convinced college graduates are arriving at the workplace with the career-ready skills they need to be successful in their positions. While this is likely true for some, it may also be the case that students who actually do possess the requisite career-ready skills struggle to synthesize what they have learned and translate their curricular and co-curricular experiences into the specific competencies sought by employers.
This initiative is focusing on the following higher-order skills, as supported by many employer surveys and organizations such as National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE), a leading advocate in the field for the development of career-ready competencies:

- Critical Thinking/Problem Solving
- Oral/Written Communications
- Teamwork/Collaboration
- Leadership
- Professionalism/Work Ethic

We are currently defining the dimensions of each of these career-ready competencies that will need to be attained as part of the criteria for earning a digital badge.

**Why Digital Badges?**

Today’s badges are digital credentials that represent skills, interests, and achievements earned by an individual through specific projects, programs, courses, or other activities. There is a learning ecosystem behind the badges that make them powerful and connected credentials.

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Alliance for Excellent Education (2013), Expanding Education and Workforce Opportunities through Digital Badges

We see digital badging as an innovative way to complement the traditional credentials offered by our institutions. Badges “make visible and validate learning in both formal and informal settings, and hold the potential to help transform where and how learning is valued” (MacArthur Foundation). And, because they are digital, badges include access to publicly viewable artifacts that not only validate learning in both formal and informal settings, but also provide more robust evidence of that learning -- allowing badge consumers more insight into exactly what the badge earner did to achieve that badge. Additionally, being digital and openly accessible means these badges can be shared through digital portfolios and social and professional networks such as Facebook and LinkedIn.

**Benefits of the USM Digital Badging Initiative**

There are several benefits to pursuing this initiative collaboratively across the USM:

- Working together is encouraging a collective conversation about common issues we face across the USM in providing a quality education that will prepare students for their careers and lifelong learning;
- Each institution benefits from the resources and tools we develop and we will support each other as we plan, design, and implement the project; and
- Collectively we can leverage relationships with regional employers and national leaders in the field to inform and support our badging system and to validate the badges we issue.

**Our Process**

We are using the Analyze, Design, Develop, Implement, and Evaluate (ADDIE) instructional design model to inform our process. The work completed/to be completed in each of the phases and are timeline are illustrated in Figure 1 and described in more detail below.
Summer 2015: Kickoff

During the kickoff phase of our work, the Collaborative met to confirm purpose of the initiative; set goals and establish expectations and working assumptions; and to develop value proposition and theory of action. This phase concluded with a set of agreed-upon “guardrails” for our work as well as prioritized set of badge criteria.

Initial Guardrails

- We agree to share information, insights, resources across institutions throughout this initiative.
- The badges we create will be open to all USM institutions and we will work towards assuring the USM badges are as open as possible for others as well (although the degree of “openness” may change over the course of the initiative).
- The badge will address a career ready skill, defined as communicating what students should know and be able to do to be “career ready.”
- Badges will be created in collaboration with employers.
- Any skill selected will be validated as valued by employers for use in the hiring process.
- Badges may be scaffolded or include a progression of skill development.
- Evidence for earning badges will largely come from co-curricular experiences, and may also come from curricular experiences.

Weighted Badge Criteria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Weight</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High employer relevancy and value</td>
<td>Meets a need in the employer recruiting and selection process. Helps differentiate candidates, improves the match and fit.</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Evidence easily communicated</td>
<td>Evidence of completion can be made clear and flexible, specific.</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Easily measured / Low admin hassle to validate / issue</td>
<td>Easily validated; does not require extensive assessment / person-hours to measure and determine success.</td>
<td>4</td>
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Fall 2015: Analyze

During the Fall semester of 2015, we concentrated on gathering and analyzing data to identify the gaps in career-readiness skills for USM graduates, as well as the benefits and challenges of digital badging tools and innovations. We conducted literature and research reviews of other digital badging initiatives and career readiness standards; explored badging tools and innovations; and organized interviews, surveys, and focus groups of employers, students, staff, other stakeholders to get feedback on the badging initiative’s design and goals.

Career-readiness standards and employer surveys reviewed included the following:

- Towson’s meta-analysis of research on skills desired by employers
- P21 - Framework for 21st Century Learning
- AAC&U - Essential Learning Outcomes and VALUE rubrics
- EDC - Work Ready Now
- New World of Work
- Institute for the Future - Future Work Skills
- Business Roundtable- Common Employability Skills
- Connecting Credentials Framework

We also facilitated a series of conversations with Dr. Daniel T. Hickey, Professor of Learning Sciences at Indiana University Bloomington, an expert in the evolving field of digital badging and the author of a MacArthur Foundation sponsored research study that aimed to understand where digital badges have been most effective.

Another key activity during this phase was the survey of regional employers. We surveyed 138 regional employers in October-November 2015 with a 22.4% response rate. Respondents represented a range of industries including Government/Non-Profit (17.95%); Technology Services (15.38%); Finance and Insurance (15.38%); and Health Care and Social Services (12.82%). Respondents generally held the title
of Talent Acquisition Manager, Recruiter, or HR Manager, and 51% of respondents had been in their roles 3 years or less. High-level findings from the survey included:

- The top career-ready skills identified by respondents were communication, critical thinking/analytic reasoning, initiative, leadership/decision-making, and strong work ethic.
- The majority of the respondents had not heard of digital badging prior to receiving the survey.
- Employers did not see much value in a digital badge certifying the top-rated career-ready skill they identified.
- The respondents believed there was little value-add for a badge as compared to their current means of collecting data on potential hires.
- Respondents were unsure if digital badges could easily fit into their current candidate evaluation processes.
- Respondents indicated there may be some value in having the badge endorsed by the USM.
- Respondents indicated there may be value in having the badge endorsed by another party.
- There was some interest among the respondents in providing or attending special recruitment opportunities for badge earners, but many were on the fence.

This survey led our team to begin thinking differently about the feasibility of having badges endorsed by employers before they were created, and instead led us to shift our focus to creating initial value for the badge earners and their institutions by basing the badges on those skills most frequently requested by employers.

**Spring 2016 - Design**

We are now in the middle of our third phase of our work, the design phase. In the first several months of this phase, we have been working on synthesizing all of the data and information gathered in the analysis phase, and revisiting our original purpose, goals, and expectations for this initiative. That process has led us to the creation of the USM Digital Badging System prototype (Figure 2) and the articulation of roles and responsibilities within this System.
Figure 2. Proposed USM Digital Badge System

USM “Launch” Badge

An open badge granted by the USM certifying that earners are ready to start their careers. Through the process of acquiring all of the career-ready badges, earners will hone their ability to identify and articulate their career-ready skills, strengths, knowledge, and experiences relevant to the positions and/or careers they seek.

Competencies based on skills identified by employers as critical for career success (aligned to NACE framework). Defined by USM Digital Badge Initiative Collaborative. Assessment criteria will be predetermined and include rubrics to assess evidence that a badge earner met the criterion.

USM Institution Eligible Programs, Courses, Experiences

Determining eligible programs and experiences will be up to each institution... although we hope there will be some sharing of resources and best practices.
Initial Roles and Responsibilities

The USM Digital Badging Initiative will...

- Articulate the dimensions of each badge competency
- Articulate the cross-cutting hallmarks of any/all badges within the badging system
- Validate the integrity of the issuance of the badges across institutions (i.e. validate that a leadership badge offered by Towson is as meaningful as a leadership badge offered by Frostburg)
- Support ongoing cross-institutional collaboration and information sharing
- Draw on lessons learned from across the institutions in order to spur larger scale improvement, growth, and sustainability of this effort

Institutions will...

- Define what experiences/knowledge/skills gained on or off campus will provide eligible evidence for earning a badge
- Define the criteria for earners
- Define what evidence earners will need to present
- Gather the evidence of students’ demonstration of the competency
- Determine if students have met minimal levels of proficiency to earn the badge
- Issue the badges
- Use the results from badge earners and other data to strengthen program effectiveness

Next Steps

As we move into the final phases of this design process, we will be collectively defining the dimensions that are represented by each career-ready competency, and working at the institutional level to define sets of experiences and evidence of knowledge and skills that would qualify an earner for a digital badge in that particular competency. We will also be choosing a pilot digital platform and a graphic design for the digital badges.

Over the course of the 2016-17 academic year, the participating institutions will pilot the implementation of the USM Digital Badging System by providing students with opportunities to earn the digital badges. During that period, we will focus on evaluating whether this initiative is meeting the objectives that we set out to meet and continue to socialize and test the concept of digital badging of career-ready skills with our regional and local employers, students, faculty, and staff.
RESEARCH AND RESOURCES INFORMING OUR WORK

**Career-Ready Skills**

- Career Readiness Defined: NACE defines career readiness, identifies key competencies
- ACE: Communicating the Value of Competencies
- ACE: Quality Dimensions for Connected Credentials:
- P21 - Framework for 21st Century Learning:
- AAC&U - Essential Learning Outcomes
- EDC - Work Ready Now
- Institute for the Future: Future Work Skills 2020
- Common Employability Skills
- Connecting Credentials Framework
- Community Colleges and 21st Century Skills: Skills Panels to Assist Student Career Success
- Credential Transparency Initiative
- A Framework for Extending the Transcript
- America's colleges are getting a bad rap on the skills gap
- Preparing Students for the Workforce: Six co-curricular opportunities for experiential learning

**Digital Badging**

- Six Steps to Building High-Quality Open Digital Badges
- EDUCAUSE: 7 Things You Should Know about... Badges
- Where Badges Work Better
- We Don’t Need No Stinking Badges... Or Do We?
- Evidence of Learning: Understanding the Supplier Ecosystem
- Open Badges in Higher Education
- Open Badges for Higher Education
- How Badges Really Work in Higher Education
- IMS Global: Enabling Better Digital Credentialing

**Digital Badging Examples in Higher Ed**

- Purdue Passport
- Penn State
- Arizona State University
- University of Michigan M-BLEM
- Seton Hall University
- Notre Dame
- Foundation for California Community Colleges
- Deakin University
- Brandman University
- OPEN SUNY
- LaGuardia Community College
- Colorado State University
- Beuth University
- Georgia Southern University

**Badging & Career Readiness**

- Digital Badging Pilot Based on Career Readiness Competencies
- What Employers Think of Badges, Nanodegrees from Online Programs
- Employer Perceptions of Critical Information Literacy Skills and Digital Badges
- Digital Badges Certify Competencies Gained through Student Clubs