

Keeping Up With... National Credentialing and Academic Libraries

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This edition of Keeping Up With... was written by Cinthya Ippoliti

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Introduction

More and more employers are determining that students are not equipped with the skills necessary to be successful in the workforce after they have completed their education, and there is a significant gap in measuring the type of learning that occurs outside the classroom especially for skills that are not easily quantifiable, such as time management or organizational skills.

With the movement for libraries to convey the value they bring to their institutions, badges and credentialing help to quantify learning that is addressed through various library-related programming and instruction efforts. Several institutions have created badging programs for Information Literacy competencies, and a few others are exploring credentials for other types of outcomes such as mastery in digital writing or multimedia production.

Background on Credentialing and Badges

At its core, credentialing can mean something as simple as earning a certificate; whether it is a certificate of completion, achievement, or even a job well done, they all signify that something, however minimal, has been completed. In that regard, a degree can also be considered a certificate, and in fact it is one of the most widely recognized types of credentials. Professionals proudly display their diplomas on office walls signaling to the rest of the world they have reached a terminal level of proficiency and achievement in that particular field.

But what about that person's other skills? For example, how would we know that he/she is well-organized and can present effectively? Certificates often attempt to measure and legitimize adeptness in areas that are not easily assessed or readily evident. This makes the way in which these areas are validated even more in need of a clear set of criteria which speak to a rigorous assessment of mastery that can cross not only disciplinary boundaries, but institutional ones as well.

The components of a credential include the information needed to determine who is providing the credential, based on what skills or competencies, to whom, and answering the all-important question of so what? This is the most difficult question to address because there is no one accrediting body that recognizes credentials as universal elements of learning, unlike in areas such as Information Literacy, where the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) sets standards almost universally utilized in library instruction programs. In other words, they are not universally recognized and coordinated and their validity relies on the context in which they are given. For example, if a student received a certificate from one institution for communication skills, there is no (easy) way for that student to transfer that credential to another institution or even an employer and prove its validity without a similar program with which to compare it as there is no accepted standard of credentialing similar to advanced degrees that are conferred for specific disciplines and which are accepted as proof of mastery of certain skill sets or concepts.

Most recently, badges have come to the forefront as a specific type of credential that is beginning to be included as part of library programs for instruction, and in some cases, for other types of literacies such as digital and visual. They have strong gaming connections that have since extended to include certification for a specific set of skills or learning outcomes, whether in the classroom or a broader learning environment. These badges are unique in that they are easily awarded, transferable and discoverable given their paperless nature. Badges are also flexible in that they can be awarded separately for a specific set of competencies, or as a cluster made up of several smaller badges to show a progression towards a larger goal. This can be especially important when trying to reward learners along the way and feel more engaged and part of the overall process instead of making it a zero sum equation where students earn either all of the badge or nothing at all.

To that end, the ACRL Digital Badges Interest Group (DBIG) began its work in 2014 to bring together interested librarians who have either already been working with digital badges, or were curious about what they were and how they would apply to their own institutional context. To date, DBIG has held one virtual forum where we explored some sample institutional programs and we plan to collect additional information about what is being done to continue this conversation on a broader level.

National Credentialing Framework

Lumina is an independent, private foundation that seeks to increase and improve postsecondary educational attainment and success on a national scale. In collaboration with the Corporation for a Skilled Workforce and the Center for Law and Social Policy, it developed a beta credentialing framework (<http://www.luminafoundation.org/resources/connecting-credentials>) that consists of 8 domains each with an increasing depth of knowledge and accompanying specialized, personal, and social skills. In 2015, ACRL and 80 other co-sponsoring organizations joined Lumina in co-sponsoring a national dialogue on credentialing (<http://connectingcredentials.org/national-dialogue/>), calling for ways to transform our nation's highly diverse and fragmented credentialing system into one that is student-centered and learning-based.

Change is needed for several reasons: to ensure educational quality; increase access; better align the work of industry, education and certification/licensure agencies; multiply the benefits of increased attainment; reduce social inequity; and foster individual progress that results in market-valued credentials (e.g. students attempting to build their own degrees via MOOCs and other new types of learning). A previous edition of Keeping Up With... focused on MOOCs (http://www.ala.org/acrl/publications/keeping_up_with/moocs)

In theory, this national credentialing framework would alleviate the issue of universal applicability of badges and would provide a structured system whereby specific competencies (such as the ability to communicate effectively) are recognized regardless of the environment in which they occur (academic, workforce, etc.) and independent of a specific badging platform. The idea is that this framework would allow anyone who possesses these skills to demonstrate mastery to prospective employers, academic institutions, or other similar entities in a way that would be validated and accredited on national or even international level.

Conclusion

As our collective gaze shifts towards providing our communities with the tools, resources and services that facilitate innovation, entrepreneurship, and creativity, it is more important than ever to account for learning that often goes unnoticed yet which is an integral component of the academic experience and beyond. Bringing those hidden skill sets to the forefront and recognizing their role within the larger framework of higher education and the workforce is of utmost importance if we are to help meet the demands of the future. Credentialing and badges will assist us in adapting to our ever changing educational landscapes and professional environments and perhaps help us re-define the very notion of success.

Further Readings

ACRL Keeping up With... Digital Badges for Instruction http://www.ala.org/acrl/publications/keeping_up_with/digital_badges
(http://www.ala.org/acrl/publications/keeping_up_with/digital_badges)

ACRL Digital Badges Interest Group: <http://www.ala.org/acrl/aboutacrl/directoryofleadership/interestgroups/acr-igdb>
(<http://www.ala.org/acrl/aboutacrl/directoryofleadership/interestgroups/acr-igdb>)

Chronicle of Higher Education Report On Credentialing: <http://chronicle.com/section/Special-Reports/35?cid=megamenu> (<http://chronicle.com/section/Special-Reports/35?cid=megamenu>)

Digital Badges for Creativity and Critical Thinking (Portland State University): <http://www.pdx.edu/oai/provosts-challenge-projects-139> (<http://www.pdx.edu/oai/provosts-challenge-projects-139>)

Educause Library - Badges: <http://www.educause.edu/library/badges> (<http://www.educause.edu/library/badges>)

Lumina Fact Sheet: <http://www.luminafoundation.org/resources/lumina-fact-sheet> (<http://www.luminafoundation.org/resources/lumina-fact-sheet>)

Information Literacy Badges at Penn State: <http://sites.psu.edu/informationliteracybadges/information-literacy-skill>
(<http://sites.psu.edu/informationliteracybadges/information-literacy-skill>)

Purdue University's Passport: <http://www.itap.purdue.edu/studio/passport/> (<http://www.itap.purdue.edu/studio/passport/>)

COMMITTEES ([HTTP://WWW.ALA.ORG/ACRL/ABOUTACRL/DIRECTORYOFLEADERSHIP/COMMITTEES](http://www.ala.org/acrl/aboutacrl/directoryofleadership/committees))

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DISCUSSION GROUPS ([HTTP://WWW.ALA.ORG/ACRL/ABOUTACRL/DIRECTORYOFLEADERSHIP/DISCUSSIONGROUPS/DGS](http://www.ala.org/acrl/aboutacrl/directoryofleadership/discussiongroups/dgs))

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