Chapter 21
Using Digital Badges to Design a Comprehensive Model for High-Impact Experiential Learning

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ABSTRACT

This chapter details the design, implementation, and promise of the Project Portal, a co-curricular badge system, as an exciting example of how digital badges can transcend traditional notions of credentialing. The authors begin by detailing their design approach, which frames goals within hypotheses and research questions, allowing for optimizing implementation based on student outcomes and ongoing data collection. The authors then share a comprehensive model through five primary functional lenses: (1) generating diverse applied learning opportunities, (2) incentivizing, (3) facilitating and (4) assessing student engagement, and (5) leveraging related impacts. Although still in its infancy, the model suggests that these functionalities are individually important and collectively sufficient to activate the promise of high-impact experiential learning as a driver for student and community impact along with key institutional priorities.

INTRODUCTION

When the University at Buffalo (UB) launched its new micro-credentialing office in 2017 and invited departments and programs to submit proposals, the promise of increased enrollments drew an impressive number of applications. Deans and directors anticipated an inherent appeal of digital badges and thus bringing new audiences, while engaging current students wanting to demonstrate specific skills and competencies during their pursuit of degrees and minors. Although members of the UB Experiential Learning Network (ELN) recognized the importance of credit-based engagement, they were seeking something far different. They envisioned co-curricular digital badges as an engine for transforming university relationships and expertise into accessible opportunities for high-impact experiential learning.

While their vision was bold, their interest in high-impact experiences was not unique. Many have recognized that undergraduate degrees are no longer sufficient, including employers seeking specific skills, competencies, and examples of what students can achieve beyond degrees and grades (Salas Velasco, 2012; Stewart, Wall, & Marciniec, 2016). The promise of a place-based education focused primarily on coursework and traditional assignments is quickly losing relevance, especially in the face of the ongoing pandemic and reliance on remote instruction (Dhawan, 2020; Faize & Nawaz, 2020). Yet despite their obvious appeal and demand, high-impact experiences are still elusive. While all colleges and universities offer some version of applied learning opportunities (Trolian & Jach, 2020), they are often administered through ancillary offices that focus on promotion and compliance without helping students customize or integrate activities within degrees or programs of study. Rather than empower students to leverage opportunities in their most diverse and powerful forms, these programs commonly limit (albeit unintentionally) students' control and access.

The ELN sought to do the opposite, using co-curricular badges to create new, dynamic, and flexible structures that place students at the center of their learning—empowering them to explore and access the full breadth of relationships, expertise, and potential engagement opportunities internal and external to the university. Beyond promoting existing offerings, they hoped to catalyze new experiences generated from students' interests and sense of purpose, while prioritizing scalability and curricular versatility, and accommodating engagement and badges within courses and programs of study. They also sought to efficiently track and analyze student learning, success, and retention, while at the same time supporting broader institutional goals, optimizing engagement, and building capacity for new opportunities. Together, these functionalities would comprise a uniquely comprehensive model for high-impact experiential learning.

This chapter details the design, implementation, and promise of the ELN's co-curricular badge system, known as the Project Portal, as an exciting example of how digital badges can transcend traditional notions of credentialing. The chapter begins with an overview of the design process, framing goals within hypotheses and research questions, allowing for the optimization of implementation based on student outcomes and ongoing data collection. The model is then shared through five primary functional lenses: (a) generating diverse applied learning opportunities; (b) incentivizing, (c) facilitating and (d) assessing student engagement; and (e) leveraging related impacts. Although the Portal is still in its infancy, early results suggest that these functionalities are individually important and collectively sufficient to activate the promise of high-impact experiential learning as a driver for student and community impact, along with key institutional priorities.

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