

Introduction

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Could a one dollar bill ever be more valuable than a one hundred dollar bill? Surprisingly, yes. Imagine walking up to a vending machine that takes only one dollar bills, but all you have is a one hundred dollar bill. Sometimes a smaller item of currency is actually more valuable than a larger one, depending on the context.

Similarly, think about academic credentials. Degrees and professional certifications are extremely valuable, but in some scenarios, it could be more important to showcase specific skills. This is where micro-credentials and digital badges can be helpful and are thus seeing a rise as a new form of educational currency. Technically speaking, digital badges are a subtype of micro-credential, but for the purposes of this report, we will use these terms interchangeably. Micro-credentials are a virtual, portable way of cashing in on acquired learning, especially granular skills. And being able to articulate your specific skills could be the determining factor in landing the job, getting the promotion, or earning the grade.

Information literacy is a skill that is particularly well-suited for micro-credentialing. Our foray into micro-credentials started in 2012, after Emily attended a local conference session about digital badges. Around the same time, Educause published one of its *7 Things to Know About . . .* series about digital badges.¹ Having taught information literacy skills for years in the “one shot” format, we immediately felt that micro-credentials seemed to be a way to extend the librarian’s reach outside the short time available in a face-to-face, one-time session. Plus, in most degree programs, information literacy is not a separately recognized skill, and yet employers, instructors, and others agree it is an important skill. To verify our suspicions, we conducted a nationwide survey of employers

in various industries and reaffirmed that information literacy was an important skill for graduates entering the workplace. We also learned about employers’ nascent attitudes to digital badges.² We then built a scaffolded information literacy digital badge program from the ground up based on our findings, also using other sources such as the ACRL *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* and the *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*. The primary purpose of our program is to use the information literacy badges within general education courses. For example, a student may be required or recommended to use a chosen badge within an English class. In the fall 2018 semester alone, we had more than 1,500 students earn one of our information literacy or “orientation level” badges, and we worked with thirty-three sections of general education courses at Penn State to implement the badges in the courses.

At this scale, the implementation of micro-credentials has truly changed the conversation about information literacy instruction in many positive ways. But no matter the scale, there is much to gain from implementing a digital badge program. One of the biggest benefits has been what Carla Casilli referred to as “self-reflexivity where the builders learned as much about themselves as the earners did.”³ Our insight into a learner’s thinking echoes what Casilli said and has been a surprising and rewarding piece of evaluating student work via digital badges.

This report will provide information about the past, present, and future of digital badges on a broad scale as well as within libraries. It will discuss other aspects to consider when building a digital badge program, including instructional design, deployment considerations, assessment, and partnerships. We hope that this issue of *Library Technology Reports* will

illuminate some of the benefits of using micro-credentials so that you feel empowered to try them as part of your programming or instruction.

Notes

1. Educause Learning Institute, “7 Things You Should Know about Badges,” *7 Things You Should Know About . . .*, June 2012, <https://library.educause.edu/resources/2012/6/7-things-you-should-know-about-badges>.
2. Victoria Raish and Emily Rimland, “Employer Perceptions of Critical Information Literacy Skills and Digital Badges,” *College and Research Libraries* 77, no. 1 (2016): 87–113, <https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.77.1.87>.
3. Carla Casilli, “Foreword,” in *Teaching with Digital Badges: Best Practices for Libraries*, ed. Kelsey O’Brien and Trudi E. Jacobson (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2018), xi.