The Seven Deadly Sins Of Digital Badging In Education

[Troy Markowitz](#)

Google Images

An academic institution's digital badging initiative is getting off the ground and students are "earning" badges, or micro-credentials, but are they actually providing value to the student toward his or her future career? Many academic institutions are going through this evolution process in deciding to certify learning through credentialing, otherwise known as digital badging to help combat the ensuing skills gap and to provide the value of a degree to learners.

Parth Detroja, bestselling author of *Swipe to Unlock* says,

> There is a fundamental disconnect with what is being taught in the classroom and what one really needs to know to be a contributing member of the modern workforce--especially in the tech industry. Working at companies like Microsoft, Facebook, Amazon and IBM, I've learned that you don't need to know how to code to succeed in tech. There is a big difference between being able to write code and being 'technical.' Being able to write good code is a valuable skill necessary to be a software engineer. Being 'technical' however is a vital skill for everyone which lets you make informed decisions—both personal and professional—by understanding how the technology you use every day actually works. Unfortunately, technologically informed graduates isn't a metric considered by U.S. News and World Report's college rankings."

According to a report by the University Professional and Continuing Education Association (UPCEA), one in five institutions now offers digital badges, but as educators tinker with micro-credentialing, digital badging initiatives at educational institutions can prove worthless to students due to seven common mistakes.

1. (Operational Inefficiency) Making faculty and staff manually issue badges

All too often, faculty and administrative staff set up manual processes such as web forms or use email to collect badge evidence from students. From there, formal evaluation and scoring of evidence happen in a separate environment from the badge platform, if at all, and then badges must be issued manually (often one at a time) based on those evaluations. This process doesn't scale, which is why most educators end up dabbling with badges and then, realizing the time sink required, give up on their initiatives, which could be useful is the strategy is deployed properly.

The key is to look beyond badging issuer platforms to a full stack solution that integrates assessment management with badging. Through this

integration, faculty and staff can streamline the digital collection, (rubric-based) scoring, and automatically issue the credential that removes 80% of the manual effort and time required to issue high-quality badges. Automation is a difference in determining whether or not institutions merely dabble with badging vs. truly invest in a sustainable badging program that benefits the students.

2. Issuing badges without authentic evidence

The second deadly sin of badging is when a badge is issued but not backed by any rigor--i.e., assessed evidence--to validate competencies certified by the badge. While many badges list specific issuance criteria, most don't provide samples of the tangible evidence submitted by learners to earn the badge, nor the assessment rubrics used to evaluate the submissions.

When you imagine a student telling the story of their skills and experience in a job interview, you can imagine how important it is for a badge--like any certification--to be accompanied by work samples that bring the certification to life so that learners can articulate the gained skills and value of attainment, not to mention, allow employers to better match to job criteria.

3. Issuing badges randomly

The market value of badges is reduced each time faculty and staff issue badges arbitrarily. Employers don't want to see participation trophy badges on a student's resume. Trivial badges don't help students reflect on the progress they're making in their learning journey.

Instead, when badges are issued as the result of progress made along a student success pathway, as mentioned through the Georgia State University initiative, learners earn meaningful badges for curricular and co-curricular milestones that signify competency attainment. By launching badge-earning pathways like those conceived by the University System of

[Maryland](#), students become more engaged in their learning and understand the value of what they learn each step of the way, and are able to communicate the skills stemming from their journey that help employers better understand their abilities. A badge-earning pathway can mirror an existing academic or co-curricular program, or can be created from scratch.

In an educational system often blamed for a "[skills gap](#)" in the United States and under scrutiny for how well they are preparing our students for careers, the biggest mistake an institution can make is to issue badges not tied to pathway-linked competencies or achievements that are tied to evidence of learning.

4. Expecting students to manually claim badges

If we know that faculty struggle with the manual nature of badge issuance, we should anticipate that students also struggle with manually claiming badges. Some studies have suggested that up to 90% of badges issued have gone unclaimed. "[Researchers](#) indicate that 54% of college emails go unread by students, despite the fact that the average college student checks their mobile device over 150 times a day." Expecting them to check their email (and spam folder) to claim a valuable credential is not the most efficient way to deploy a badging or micro-credentialing program.

There is a better way: Instead of forcing students to manually claim a badge from a badge issuing platform by checking their email, institutions need tools that automatically insert (i.e., "direct deposit") badges into a student's official professional profile to avoid badges from being unclaimed.

5. Hiding badges where employers won't look

One of the worst mistakes an institution can make is to award a student a badge and then proceed to leave the badge tucked away within their

Learning Management System (LMS), which a majority of students do not have access to after they graduate. Students are sharp and if there is not a tangible value matched to their desire to obtain a great career, the badges awarded will be rendered useless for them.

6. Storing badges in a separate silo

It is a common error for institutions to encourage a process that places badges and resumes in separate silos. Badges need to cross-link with portfolio projects (i.e., the evidence behind the badge), resumes, LinkedIn profiles, etc. Since employers are most likely to search for skills and keywords inside of resume databases, LinkedIn and e-portfolio databases, badges need to live in integrated harmony with these networks, and not just on a page with an assortment of badges.

7. Issuing badges that don't match to internships or jobs

Similar to the mistake of issuing random badges, issuing badges that have no relation to skills required by internships or employers can be detrimental to the value of your badging initiative from a student's point of view. If a badge does not equate to a concrete skill (whether soft or hard) that an employer can search and identify then its purpose in propelling the student towards success is not valuable.

While digital badges may be a great tool to incentivize students, it is important that all badges awarded are tied to competencies employers are actually searching for to really give the student lifelong value from their education such as critical thinking, leadership, problem-solving and teamwork.

The way to ensure your institutions' badging initiative is set up for success is to ask, "how will this provide value directly to our students," every step of the way. It's time to turn badges into valuable tools for learners and help them connect with employers searching for their specific skills.