Digital Badges Program Proposal

A proposal for badges issued digitally (online) through a digital credential network (Credly). Prepared by the Digital Badges Working Group facilitated by Kathi Kern, Associate Provost of Teaching, Learning, & Academic Innovation; Professor of History

Working Group Members:
- Leslie Vincent: Chair, Senate Academic Programs Committee; Senior Lecturer, Marketing & Supply Chain
- Katherine McCormick: Acting Associate Provost for Planning & Assessment; Professor, Early Childhood Education
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- Kristin Ashford: Associate Dean, College of Nursing; Professor, Nursing Instruction (through 07/2021)
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- Gina Dugas: Associate Vice President, Finance & Administration
- Trey Conatser: Associate Director, Center for the Enhancement of Learning & Teaching
- Patsy Carruthers: Senior Director, Teaching, Learning, & Academic Innovation

Our Purpose

The landscape for alternative, short-term microcredentials is a vast, emerging field and includes for-credit and non-credit options from a host of sponsoring institutions. In this proposal, we focus exclusively on the promise and value of digital badges earned through credit-bearing courses at the University of Kentucky. We seek Senate Council feedback on this proposal before we offer a rules change to the Senate to render our Digital Badging pilot a permanent feature of our academic programs.

Why Digital Badges?

Faculty can creatively showcase the benefits of their courses and disciplines to a wide variety of students and other stakeholders.

Digital badges enable faculty to pull back the veil on their curriculum and elucidate the skills students are learning, from soft skills underlying coursework to specializations that can be highlighted within a larger credential. Badges function to recognize, assess, and motivate learning. Because badges build on existing courses or may inspire new courses, faculty can design badges to respond quickly to emerging fields and expectations from professional organizations and employers. Overall, badges offer a way for faculty to think creatively and proactively about how their courses and disciplines prepare students to engage a wide range of challenges and opportunities throughout their careers.

Employers seek soft skills.

According to the *Wall Street Journal*, in a study of 900 executives, 92 percent reported that "soft skills" are as important or more important than technical skills, while 89 percent struggle to find employees with appropriate soft skills. Similarly, the Quality Assurance Commons for Higher and Postsecondary Education, funded by the Lumina Foundation in 2016, has conducted extensive research to determine the Essential Employability Qualities (EEQ) that all learners will need to prepare for the changing dynamics of the workforce. Graduates need to demonstrate that they are: communicators, thinkers and problem solvers, inquirers, collaborators, adaptable, principled and ethical, responsible and professional, and lifelong learners.

Badges provide a flexible credential that can be layered into UK's existing educational ecosystem.

For students, badges provide an opportunity to integrate academic and professional training, to earn a credential they can show "along the way," and to display and narrate their own educational journey. Amplified by social media, badges allow students to convey aspects of their learning in persuasive ways to educators and employers.

Digital Badges and other "microcredentials" occupy a wide middle ground between two extremes: one that insists that college is exclusively an intellectual experience and one that assumes that college should be focused on job training. By instituting this option for our students, we underscore the value and applicability of the liberal arts education our students receive at UK to their future lives as professionals.

Pilot Program at UK: Summer 2020 and 2021

The Digital Badges pilot launched with Senate Council approval in the Summer of 2020, initially as a strategy to encourage summer enrollment in the midst of the pandemic. Colleges were asked to evaluate their summer curricular offerings and to design badge programs that could be earned by students who completed two curated, linked courses offered exclusively in the summer session. We contracted with the company Credly to host the digital badges. A total of 22 badge topics were offered. Students in the initial summer earned 118 badges. As a model of shared governance, a working group of faculty and administrators approached the University Senate seeking representation on the Digital Badges Working Group. Senator Leslie Vincent, chair of the Academic Programs Committee, joined the working group. This working group surveyed the scholarly literature on the topic to gain a better sense of the landscape of microcredentials. We consulted widely on campus with various stakeholders. The pilot was extended formally by the Senate until December 2021. In summer 2021, the working group hosted a research presentation from EAB to deepen our understanding of the national landscape for short-term credentials, sought the feedback of local employers, considered the policy and fiscal implications for the University of Kentucky, and sought the insights of our students. We also sought consultations from:
- The Associate Deans for Undergraduate Studies
- Kimberly Kluemper, Business Engagement Director, Coldstream Research Campus
- Amanda Lawrence, Faculty Lecturer, Center for Instructional Communication
- Todd Stoltzfus, Assistant Director, Career Center

- Ray Clere, Director, Career Center
- Sarah Madison, Senior Director, Graham Office of Career Management, B&E Undergraduate Center
- Kim Sayre, Director, Industry Engagement, College of Engineering
- Ilka Balk, Senior Program Manager, Horticulture; Associate Director, UK James Beam Institute
- Megan Sizemore, Chief of Staff, College of Communication and Information

Definition and Examples

Digital badges are electronic indicators of skills, competencies, or content specializations gained through curricular or co-curricular work. Typically, not represented on a transcript, the badges are stored, shared, and verified digitally. The University of Kentucky uses Credly as its badging platform. Badge topics have ranged from health policy studies to personal and family finances and criminology and legal studies. Below are three examples of digital badge images and descriptions.

	Those earning this designation have demonstrated an applied understanding of professional settings and relationships, professional communication strategies, and diverse approaches to organizational practices including assimilation and socialization, decision-making, conflict management, organizational change, emotions in the workplace, and cultural diversity. Students seeking knowledge about workplace communication should complete two courses: COM 315: Understanding Workplace Communication in U.S. society, and COM 325: Introduction to Organizational Communication.
	What better place than the Horse Capital of the World to learn more about the business aspects of the horse industry? The Equine Management and Industry Fundamentals badge is open to all UK students and anyone with a high school diploma. To earn the badge, complete any combination of the following courses (no pre-requisite requirements) with a grade of C or better for a total of six credit hours: EQM 300 Topics in Equine Science and Management: Survey of Equine Assisted Service (2 credit hours); EQM 300 Topics in Equine Science and Management: Global Sport Industry (2 credit hours); EQM 300 Topics in Equine Science and Management: Thoroughbred Investments (3 credit hours); EQM 302 Equine Event Planning (1 credit hour)

Those who earn the Digital Marketing badge understand broad marketing concepts with a deeper concentration in digital marketing strategy creation and evaluation. Earners are familiar with search engine optimization, social media marketing campaigns and effective social media campaign evaluation techniques. Complete MKT 315 Digital Marketing Strategy Creation and MKT 325 Digital Marketing Strategy Evaluation with a grade of C or better.

Feedback from Employers and Students

Summary of Feedback from Employers

At the UK Recruitment Summit (8/5/21), area employers were invited to participate in a brief survey on digital badges. Areas represented included nonprofit, education, logistics, manufacturing, IT, finance, insurance, government, utilities, and food service and retail. Overall, employer feedback emphasized a lack of familiarity with badges and microcredentials, a preference for badges to feature "soft skills" development such as teamwork, conflict resolution, and interpersonal communication, and the need for badges to indicate in some way the type and/or amount of work that was required. Employers were split at the time of survey on the value they'd place on badges when making recruitment or hiring decisions.

Summary of Feedback from Students

A small focus group of students from different major areas (n=4) was convened on 10/19/21 to explore students' familiarity, ideas, and recommendations for digital badging programs. The students were mostly unfamiliar with digital badges and wondered whether employers would be familiar with them.

Asked why badges might appeal to students at UK, the student participants discussed how they would:
- enhance degree programs with focused/specialized, adjacent, or even far-flung knowledge and skill development opportunities;
- help students communicate what they've gained from their educations; and
- offer an opportunity to meet core competencies set by professional and academic organizations;
- and, offer an opportunity to network with professors and professionals.

Students indicated that soft skills, as well as technical and quantitative skills/literacies, would be desirable focuses for badges. In addition, they proposed that some badges might enhance existing curricular and extracurricular programs in and beyond the University. (Students had many ideas about how badges might be advertised and made enticing for students at UK; see the appendix for more.)

Asked about their thoughts on what the process ought to look like for students to apply for badges, the student participants were less certain in their responses but emphasized the need for a streamlined application process that removed steps and barriers to signing up for a badge program and allowed students to keep track of their progress. Considering the visual design of the badges, students suggested that iconography and color be better utilized to differentiate the badges while adhering to an overall (yet flexible) template that makes a badge recognizable as such.

Badge Description – Senate

Badge programs consist of two to three courses that provide one or more defined skill sets or competencies that can be useful to students. Badges provide students with a mechanism to formally identify and acknowledge incremental academic learning. These credentials do not appear on a student's transcript but rather are accessed through badging technology, which will provide a student with the ability to digitally document having earned a particular badge.

A badge must be a minimum of five credit hours and must not exceed eight credit hours. A student must earn a C or better, or a Pass in a pass/fail course, in each required course to earn a badge. Courses required for a badge can be in any hundred series (see SR 3.2.1.1).

At a minimum, the proposal for a badge will include the following information: badge name; description; audience served; learning objectives; and assessment plan. In order to offer a badge, there must be a UK employee who is identified as being responsible for tracking student participation and using the badging software to issue digital badges upon successful completion of a badge.

Badges require the approval of the unit faculty ("program faculty") and that unit's respective college-level faculty body. Upon approval at the college level, the approval process will follow the guidance laid out in SR 3.1.3.3.3.2.3 ("Other Changes").

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Section 4. *Standard numbering system*

The number system reflects the level of course material and associated rigor. With the exception of upper graduate level and professional courses, any prerequisite restrictions limiting the level of a student accepted into a course shall be specified in a course's prerequisites. [US: 11/14/2016] Courses shall be numbered as follows:

001-099   No credit, non-degree and/or developmental courses; [US: 9/10/2001]

100-199	*Freshmen-level course; undergraduate credit only; [US: 11/14/2016]*
200-299	*Sophomore-level course; undergraduate credit only; [US: 11/14/2016]*
300-399	*Junior-level course; undergraduate credit only; [US: 11/14/2016]*
400-499	*Advanced junior- and senior-level course; undergraduate credit only;*
400G-499G	*Senior and first-year graduate-level course; graduate credit for non-majors only; [US: 11/14/2016]*
500-599	*First-year graduate-level course; undergraduate and graduate credit; [US: 11/14/2016]*
600-799	*Upper graduate-level course; open only to graduate students; [US: 11/14/2016]*
800-999	*Professional programs course; open only to students enrolled in professional degree programs (see SR **Error! Reference source not found.**). [US: 2/13/2012; 11/14/2016; 3/19/2018]*

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Section 8.   Other Changes

A proposal that has not been identified as a significant change by one of the lower levels of review or Senate Council Office (SR 3.1.3.1.3) shall proceed directly to 10-day post (SR 3.1.3.3.3.2.4). The Senate Council shall review a proposal received from SAPC pursuant to SR 3.1.3.3.2.3 and take appropriate action. The Senate Council may direct that the proposal shall proceed directly to the Senate 10-day posting approval process (SR 3.1.3.3.3.2.4). If the Senate Council approves the proposal for consideration by the Senate at a Senate meeting, the Senate Council shall place the proposal on the University Senate agenda for its action. The Senate shall either (1) approve the proposal, or (2) shall make the final University decision to disapprove and stop action on that proposal. The Senate Council office shall circulate reports of these decisions to the Provost, Registrar and other appropriate entities. [US: 4/23/2018]

Section 9.   Posting

The Senate Council Office shall post proposals to change an existing certificate or degree on the corresponding Senate web site for ten business days. [US: 5/7/2012]

Section 10.   Objections

Any University Faculty member can raise an objection to a posted proposal through a member of the University Senate. If a Senator raises an objection to the Senate Council and the objection is not resolved, then the Senator may have the issue placed on the agenda of the next regular Senate Council meeting by having five Senators submit an objection to the Senate Council Office. If the Senate Council deems the objection has merit, then it will place the item on the Senate agenda. The Senate shall be informed about the nature of the objection by information included with the proposal packet. Formal action by the University Senate on the proposal is final Senate action. The Senate Council shall circulate reports of these decisions to the Provost, Registrar and other appropriate entities. [US: 5/7/2012]

Section 11.   Final approval

If no objection is raised to the Senate Council Office within ten business days of the posting, then the proposal is approved. The Senate Council Office will report approvals to the Provost, Registrar and other appropriate entities. [US: 5/7/2012]

Proposed Processes: Approving Badges and Awarding Badges

1. Badge is initiated by the educational unit faculty (i.e., departments) and will include
    a. Badge name and description (no more than 500 words)
    b. Audience or population served
    c. If custom badge desired, include graphic representation of badge (PNG between 600x600 and 2048x 2048 pixels)
    d. Learning objectives
    e. Course requirements (at least two) and options
    f. Minimum course grade requirements
    g. Culminating assessment or other learning activity that completes badge requirements
2. Badge is reviewed and approved by the college, and then forwarded to Senate Council.
3. Senate Council approval sends badge to web transmittal.
4. Badge software administrator(s) will access web transmittal forms and list badges on Credly.
5. Upon students' completion of badges, the educational unit will submit the badge completion report (template provided) of student information to the badge administrator.
6. Administrator will upload the spreadsheet and trigger the Credly system to award badges.

Next Steps for Implementation

- Colleges define a process for badge approval

- Develop an assessment process for badges
- Engage in an ongoing conversation with the vendor regarding a data preservation plan
- Senate Academic Programs Committee reviews badge initiative after two years

Appendix A: Employer and Student Feedback

Survey Feedback from Employers (n=17)

- How familiar are you with digital badges?
  - 47% not familiar at all
  - 29% slightly familiar
  - 12% moderately familiar
  - 6% very familiar
  - 6% no response
- What types of skills do you feel provide the most value for a digital badge? (ranked order of 3)
  - 1st: soft skills, such as communication, leadership, problem solving, teamwork, etc.
  - 2nd: knowledge-based skills specific to an employee's job
  - 3rd: technical skills, such as software proficiency, technical writing, project management, data analysis, etc.
- Which of these topics seem most important in your field or industry? (select all from list of 17)
  - 23% teamwork
  - 18% conflict resolution
  - 16% interpersonal communication
  - 11% project management
  - 8% social media management
- Would it be important for a badge to indicate the type and/or amount of work that a student completed to earn it?
  - 94% yes
  - 6% no
- How much value do you/would you place on badges or microcredentials when making recruitment or hiring decisions?
  - 24% a lot
  - 24% a moderate amount
  - 35% a little
  - 18% none at all

Focus Group Feedback from Students (n=4)

A small focus group of students from different major areas was convened on 10/19/21 to explore students' familiarity, ideas, and recommendations for digital badging programs. Of the group, three were unfamiliar with digital badges and one was only slightly familiar in the context of icons they had seen on LinkedIn profiles. However, prior to the focus group, this student perceived that those badges represented superficial and brief efforts (e.g., "5-minute online training [modules]"). None of the students had earned a digital badge, nor had they attempted to earn one.

After learning about the digital badging proposal, including what the badges would potentially represent, students indicated one concern regarding the legibility of badges (cf. the LinkedIn comment above) for both students and employers as well (e.g., "if we didn't know what they were, would employers?").

By and large, however, students indicated a range of reasons as to why a digital badge might appeal to a student at UK:
- Badges might appeal to students whose schedules or degree programs do not have enough room for another minor or an undergraduate certificate, but who would like to diversify their portfolio with employer-friendly credentials and skills.
- Badges may help students communicate what they're gained from their college education in clear and persuasive ways, especially if they majored in an area that is broad, more abstract, or difficult for the layperson to understand in terms of concrete skills and knowledge.
- On the one hand, badges may allow students to test out areas they're interested in (e.g., a major or minor) with a take-away regardless of whether it leads to a larger credential. On the other hand, students also saw that badges may seem like less of a risk if the courses counted towards elective hours for current degree programs (i.e., a concern over adding time-to-degree and extra costs).
- Badges may be attractive to students in professional schools or planning to go into professional schools (e.g., for a graduate program) given that many professional areas have core competencies that are standardized by an accrediting body or other professional organization. Students may or may not have a chance to develop these core competencies or at least explicitly refer to them in their undergraduate coursework, and a badge would help them demonstrate their track record. For example, the [AAMC Core Competencies for Entering Medical Students](#).
- Students felt that badges may also represent a networking opportunity in terms of working with new professors or continuing to work with professors who have been influential. In addition, students may also get a chance to network with professionals-in-training in other areas and gain perspective on their own area of study (especially if they are in the final year or two of their program and potentially taking only upper-level classes in their major department).

Students brainstormed topics or skills that they thought would be attractive to students for badges:
- Cultural competencies, especially for STEM majors
- Interprofessional skills
- Technical literacies
- Statistical methods and analyses; data and quantitative literacies beyond the required Core course
- Workplace orientation (e.g., Spanish for business professionals, navigating workplace culture)
- Service learning

- Partnerships with non-UK training programs enhanced with UK coursework, e.g., Peace Corps readiness program
- Integration with special opportunities such as education abroad programs

Students indicated ways that students might be made aware of (and enticed to pursue) digital badges:
- Integrate them into advising appointments; generally, recruit advisers into promoting badges and connecting students with more information when a badge seems relevant. Advisers can post updates about badges in Canvas shells that they maintain or contribute to. Additionally, if majors or departments maintain non-catalogue Canvas shells information can be pushed there as well.
- If students heard from employers that they valued badges in hiring decisions and/or developing a career trajectory after hire, students would be more likely to invest their time and energy (and money) in coursework related to badges
- Once the badge program gets off the ground and students successfully earn badges, those students could speak to their motivations, experiences, and benefits in earning a badge during events such as merit weekend and summer orientation.
- Technical integration into UK's systems alike to degree programs and other credentials (e.g., minors, certificates) would more transparently invite students to participate in badging programs. For example: badges being viewable on myUK along with majors and minors, incorporated into major maps for degree programs, integrated into the degree audit system, etc. While relevant badges can be linked to appropriate majors, having them all viewable in one comprehensive space will also be important.
- Recruit parent interest via social media groups and parent-friendly events on campus.
- Social media advertising campaigns focusing on Instagram and more targeted work with specific Facebook groups. Graphic design, aesthetics, tone will be important for credibility and interest.
- Use the digital signage available at particular locations across campus.
- While the students recognize that this would be an uneven method, if faculty were to announce the possibility of badges, especially ones connected to the course or program at hand, students may be amenable to looking into them. A statement at the front of the syllabus about how a course counts towards a badge (or badges) would also help (though it was emphasized that if the message were buried later in the syllabus it would not be effective).
- Students wondered how badges might be communicated to high school students considering UK as both a recruiting tool and an awareness campaign (e.g., as part of existing programs).

Asked about their thoughts on what the process ought to look like for students to apply for badges, the student participants were less certain in their responses but emphasized the need for a streamlined application process that removed steps and barriers to signing up for a badge program and allowed students to keep track of their progress. Students indicated preference for a student-submitted form to kick off the process (as opposed to having to contact a faculty director or other figure for information). If the process could look, function, and/or feel as similar as possible to signing up for classes, students would find it to be more approachable and intuitive. One student suggested using the study abroad portal as a model for an individual student's interface with badge programs once they have begun the process: for example, a checklist of tasks to complete and/or an interactive dashboard.

Considering the visual design of the badges, students suggested that iconography and color be better utilized to differentiate the badges while adhering to an overall (yet flexible) template that makes a badge recognizable.

As a final miscellaneous consideration, students also indicated the importance of a process for current students to take advantage of a badging program that might otherwise be unattainable for them because they would not be able to meet timespan requirements (e.g., if courses must be taken within a span of time such as two consecutive fall-spring semesters, and a current student—say, a junior—took one of the badge-required classes during their first year).

Appendix B: Trends and Examples

Alternative Credential Programs Trends (Source: EAB)

- Visual representation of skill mastery
- Verification of specific professional competencies
- Faculty-developed competencies mapped to existing course work, such as research, oral presentations, critical thinking
- Supporting non-traditional students attempting to obtain specific skills from their courses

University Examples

- Wichita State: Overview, Badges
- Arizona State University: ASU for You
- Penn State: Welcome Page, Overview
- UNC: Overview, Digital Badging Report (with case studies)
- Northeastern University (included in UNC case studies)
- UC Davis
- Colorado State: Overview, badges
- University of Central Oklahoma

In the News

- *Inside Higher Education*: An Online 'Moon Shot' for the Developing World
  - Free online certificate program from **Arizona State** to be offered in 40 languages to reach refugees, women, and others in the developing world. Badge for each course, pathway to the certificate.
- Lumina Report: Badge Count 2020
  - Details on the growth of digital badges.
- *Inside Higher Education*: From Badging to Blockchain: Documenting Skills Learned
  - How do universities document hard and soft skills?
- *The Washington Post*: Growing 'maze' of education credentials is confusing consumers, employers
  - Non-academic sources of badges are increasing.

- *EdSurge*: [More Employers Are Awarding Credentials](#)
  - "Colleges and universities in particular stand to benefit from more research, dialogue and action related to employer-issued credentials. The stacking and weaving of employer-issued credentials to create new pathways into college degree and certificate programs is becoming an increasing trend."