Chapter 19
Digital Badging at Scale at Penn State University:
A Case Study Within the Libraries and Engineering

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the authors discuss two examples of digital credential implementations at Penn State University. Penn State University is a large R1 with a main campus located in Central Pennsylvania. The purpose of this chapter is to situate the broader digital credential movement within one example of how it has played out in higher education. Within this one example, the implementations between the University Libraries and College of Engineering have similarities and differences. This chapter demonstrates that the purpose and goals of a digital credentialing program heavily influence decisions made from the beginning of the effort through maturation. Outside forces that impact what a digital credentialing effort looks like will be discussed such as administrative requirements and concerns over visual identity. Finally, this chapter provides thoughts on where digital credentials are headed within higher education.

INTRODUCTION

The Pennsylvania State University has long been a leader in distance education and online learning (Dawson, 2017) and was an early adopter of digital badges in 2012 (Bolken, 2014). Badging work at

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Penn State started with a seed grant to develop an internal open badging platform and has evolved into multiple efforts within different units and programs at the university serving a range of learners including students, staff, alumni, as well as earners outside the university system. A key question of digital credentials is: Are they valued and sought out by the people earning them and the units that these people want to share their credentials with? To answer this question in the affirmative, credentials must have a context, purpose, and educational aspect. You will see the terms digital badge and digital credential throughout this chapter. This is mostly due to the nature of the conversations around terminology (Iafrate, 2017). The terms digital credential and digital badge are interchangeable in the course of this chapter. Regardless of the word being used, the technical standard underlying these terms is the open badging standard.

To elucidate the opportunities and challenges of implementing scalable digital credentials at a large R1 university — "Very High Research Activity" — marked by both administrative centralization *and* strong academic independence, this chapter highlights similar yet distinct cases of the design and implementation of digital credentials: The University Libraries (Libraries) and The College of Engineering (COE). The Libraries and COE as organizations are both large, complex, rely heavily on instructional design expertise to support digital credentials, and serve thousands of students. They differ in that the University Libraries: is an administrative unit that supports the entire university; leverages an internally developed badging platform that functions as a lite learning management system (LMS); and has been involved in badging since 2013, primarily issuing badges to current students. COE, on the other hand, is an academic college whose work in digital credentials officially launched in 2019, and it uses an externally supported badging platform to serve its two distinct target audiences of current COE students as well as those outside of the university.

This chapter first discusses the overall university context for the digital credentials exploration, design, and implementation, including the roles of key thought leaders like Kyle Peck (Peck, 2012) in this space. Then, the focus shifts to digital badging within the Libraries as a whole, taking a deep dive into the English department that partners with the Libraries offering badges for many years as part of their formal curriculum. The chapter then moves to the second part of the case study and examines the overall COE badging initiative, taking a close look at the work within the Department of Mechanical Engineering. To identify areas of interest for others at different points in their digital credentialing journey, this chapter discusses challenges, successes, key similarities, and key differences within the Libraries and COE. The chapter closes with a discussion of what's next for digital credentialing, both within Penn State and higher education more broadly.

Ultimately this chapter demonstrates the importance of balancing standards and quality expectations with the flexibility to enable organizations like the library as well as academic colleges and departments to leverage digital badges for their strategic goals.

DIGITAL CREDENTIALING AT PENN STATE

Penn State has long prided itself on being a leader in providing education to a variety of learner populations and in a diversity of formats. The university was founded in 1855, established as a land grant institution in the 1860s, and offered its first correspondence courses in 1892 (Pennsylvania State University, n.d.). The university comprises 24 unique campuses serving distinct populations. While many of the campuses offer two-year degrees with a large percentage of those students transferring to the main campus to earn a bachelor's degree, other campuses offer their own four-year degrees, some with graduate programs.