

University Consortium Tackles Credentialing for 21st Century Skills

6 diverse colleges design digital badges that could guide students' learning and become currency across schools to signal career readiness

Washington, DC: September 16, The Education Design Lab, whose 21st Century Skills Badging Challenge was recently [featured on PBSNews Hour](#), today announced the launch of a full group of higher education partners to co-create digital badges addressing the “soft skills gap” that employers have highlighted in recent years. This diverse cohort of private and public learning institutions highlights the importance and alignment among all types of colleges to solve for the rapidly changing needs of employers and of institutions as they re-imagine teaching and learning beyond the traditional classroom.

Each institution is contributing by co-leading the development work with the Lab on one rigorous and portable 21st century skill digital badge, which will form a portfolio of 21st century skill digital badges that can be shared across the cohort. The work builds from a Lab-facilitated “design challenge” two years ago at George Mason University that first asked the question “How might we capture informal learning in ways that are meaningful to employers?” Mason President, Angel Cabrera notes, “As a university focused on access, we recognize that these are the new power skills, more important in many fields than GPA, and if we can help our students make sense of all their learning through the lens of these lifelong skills, it gives them a leg up with employers and a higher likelihood of success as they understand and develop their strengths.” Last year, the University of Maryland System joined the challenge along with Georgetown University and in 2016 Georgetown and Mason each prototyped one badge with the Lab, involving students, faculty and employers in the co-design. New partners for this year include: Bay Path University, University of Arizona, University of Virginia, Vassar College and two soon-to-be announced international universities, through a partnership with the non-profit organization IREX.

Employers are signaling the degree alone is no longer a sufficient proxy for skills like creative problem solving, collaboration, critical thinking, resilience, etc. This cohort, which also includes employers from multiple sectors, entrepreneurs creating products in the space and a host of subject matter experts, is committed to creating a set of rigorous and portable micro-credentials that can scale and serve students across and beyond those at the participating institutions. “Our work with employers tells us they want rigorous, portable and assessable credentials, and we are meeting those criteria through a collaborative approach rather than creating a different language for each school,” said Kathleen deLaski, founder and president of Education Design Lab, a national non-profit supporting more than 60 universities and learning institutions. “Beyond positioning grads for the job market, the prototype badges are also demonstrating the power of cross campus cohorts around personal strength development and [student reaction](#) has been not just positive, but even grateful.”

Colleges and universities are considering how to intentionally develop students' 21st century skills and see these digital badges as providing both an important framework to layer over existing courses and programming (e.g., study abroad or internships), and as an opportunity to educate students about the importance of these skills inside and outside of the classroom as well as in the workplace.

Jonathan Finkelstein, the founder and CEO of Credly, a leading digital credential platform provider, said, “Non-cognitive skills are in high demand with employers, but the relevant signals are often obscured by the surrounding noise and opacity of courses and degrees. We welcome the opportunity to work with the Education Design Lab and the university consortium partners to offer laser-focused credentials that are portable, transparent, verified, machine-readable and aligned to open standards.”

Education Design Lab

The goal, at the end of the 2016-17 academic year, is for participating institutions to be able to access all of the digital badge prototypes and make them broadly available to their students. Other schools can pilot with their students at that time. The Lab is also identifying employers interested in participating in virtual career fairs for students who have earned one or more of the 21st century skill badges. Yves Lermusi, CEO of Checkster, a leader in web-based talent decision tools, said, "We have been helping employers make better talent decisions for recruiting and promotion for years. We have seen consistently that employers are looking for more than just skills and knowledge. We are thrilled to be part of the Education Design Lab [Badging Challenge](#) that provides exactly that and will help employers better understand students' strengths, universities to find innovative ways to complement their traditional degree and students to show themselves in a more meaningful way."

For more information, contact Don Fraser, dfraser@eddesignlab.org
<http://eddesignlab.org/badgingchallenge/>