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Grades Out, Badges In

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David Schwen for The Chronicle

Grades are broken. Students grub for them, pick classes where good ones come easily, and otherwise hustle to win the highest scores for the least learning. As a result, college grades are inflated to the point of meaninglessness—especially to employers who want to know which diploma-holder is best qualified for their jobs.

That's a viewpoint driving experiments in education badges. Offered mostly by online start-ups, the badges are modeled on the brightly colored patches on Boy Scout uniforms but are inspired primarily by video games: Just as most video games offer ways for players to "level up" frequently, to keep them excited, most education-badge projects involve rewarding achievements more fine-tuned than passing (or acing) a course. In a remedial math course, for instance, a badge might be awarded for mastering a concept, whether "surface area" or "median and mode." Or badges might certify soft

skills not usually measured at all in college courses, like teamwork or asking good questions.

So what if colleges replaced grades with badges?

Erin Knight, leader of an education-badge project run by the Mozilla Foundation that provides a platform for students to display such badges on their Web sites, argues that grades shift students' goals from learning to earning, because the stakes are so high when the result of an entire course is reduced to a single letter.

"If you tell people in a class to blog because they're going to get a grade for it, they will do that," she said in a recent interview in *The Chronicle's* technology podcast. "But the types of interaction and participation you're going to see are going to be very different than if it's organic and people feel like they're a community of learners and really want to contribute and have their own voice."

One key benefit of education badges could simply be communicating what happens in the classroom in a more employer-friendly form.

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On Purdue University's main campus, Bill Watson will try badges in an online course he's teaching this month. (He'll also give grades, as required by Purdue.) The course, on learning-systems design, offers a survey for education students covering various teaching styles. Mr. Watson, an assistant professor of educational technology, says students will be able to earn eight to 10 badges during the course, each badge representing a key learning objective. One badge might signal "case-based instruction facilitator," for those who have shown they can apply the case-based model of teaching.

"Badges are in a way modules, and in a way you could build your own degree," he says.

Purdue doesn't offer a degree in making video games, for instance, but if it switched to a badge system campuswide, students could take courses with enough relevant badges to show an employer that they had focused on game design as they earned their degrees in computer science, Mr. Watson explains.

Badges could also show employers what type of worker a student is.

Daniel T. Hickey, an associate professor of learning sciences at Indiana University at Bloomington, is experimenting with awarding badges for "collaborative engagement" and other forms of class participation.

He is asking students in a graduate course not only to comment on one another's projects, but also to give an online thumbs-up to the most helpful comments from other students. He calls thse "stamps," and they take the form of three ampersands in a row, together with the initials of the student giving the accolade. At the end of each week, the professor gives the student with the most stamps the collaborative-engagement badge, and at the end of the term, one student will win a badge for the most useful collaboration of all.

Mr. Hickey is using the online badge system set up by Mozilla, which means that students can display them in their online résumés or cite them on Facebook and Twitter.

He thinks the system will motivate students better than grades for such collaboration. "If you grade comments that students post, there are going to be a million of them, and no one's going to read them, and they're going to be boring," he says. "I made a very deliberate decision not to attach grades at all to my badges. It's finding a way to informally recognize and really to celebrate more social forms of learning."

Sophia Bender, a doctoral student in the course, won the first collaborative-engagement badge. She has no plans to announce it to the world using social media, although she does relish the honor. "It's just sort of that I'm proud of myself, and I don't need other people to applaud me," she says.

Of course, if badges did replace grades, they could suffer their own kind of inflation. Or worse, a proliferation of badge types could make it hard for employers to sort through colorful but lengthy résumés.

If employers do end up hitting the "like" button on badges, they may challenge the need for traditional college degrees altogether. If a student can sew enough patches on his or her online résumé from courses at a variety of institutions, why stay at one place for four years just to get a certificate suitable for framing?