A CASE STUDY OF THE CAREER SKILLS INSTITUTE AT SANTA BARBARA CITY COLLEGE

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT THROUGH DIGITAL BADGES

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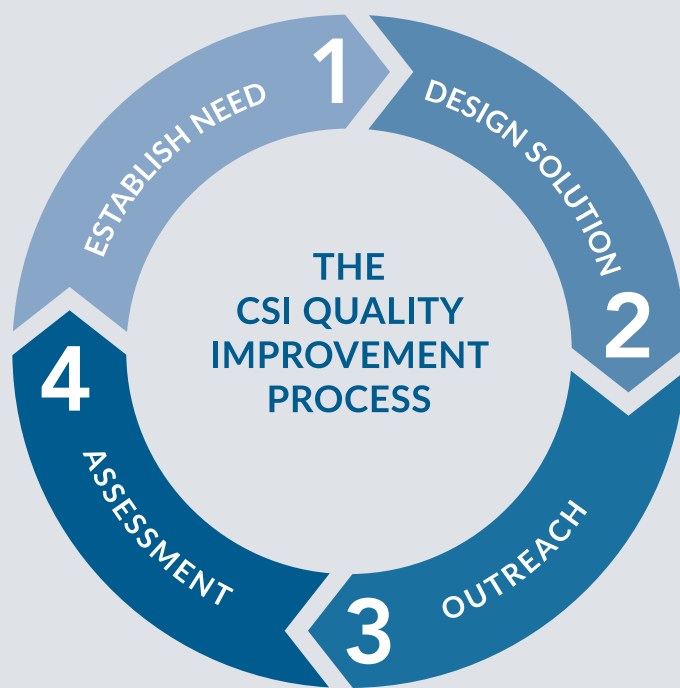
WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT THROUGH DIGITAL BADGES

In collaboration with

Acclaim

synED ACCOMPLISH MORE

THE CSI QUALITY IMPROVEMENT PROCESS

1 ESTABLISH NEED

2 DESIGN SOLUTION

3 OUTREACH

4 ASSESSMENT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Santa Barbara City College (SBCC) reassessed its traditional business skills program. With validated local business feedback, SBCC redesigned its entire professional development program from the ground up and also used digital badges as a catalyst to invigorate the program.

Because badges are such a new concept, SBCC worked with synED and Pearson Acclaim to fit the badge technology to the overall project. The badges offered by SBCC are branded with the college's name, giving anyone looking at them the validation that they were issued by an accredited educational institution

The synED team was also heavily involved in marketing the Career Skills Institute (CSI) and its programs to prospective students and employers. SynED reached out to 40 companies in the Santa Barbara area to set up meetings to explain the new program and how it could benefit their employees.

The rebranded CSI launched in Fall 2015. Since then, more than 1800 students have enrolled in badge programs. There are currently 76 courses offered as part of 23 badge programs with plans to continue adding courses to meet the changing needs of the modern workforce.

A continual quality improvement process has been instituted to keep the program fresh and relevant. Overall, replicability was an important objective for this effort to make the program easily implemented at other colleges in the region. The program has been well received by students and businesses alike.

MELISSA MORENO
SBCC

SHELLY DIXON
SBCC

CHALLENGES

SBCC Career Skills Institute Director, Shelly Dixon, says that before the badge initiative was implemented, the program was struggling. The existing credit framework was not able to adapt its programming to meet the changing needs of employers. The same courses in the same format were presented year after year which resulted in dwindling enrollments.

"We had pretty much saturated the market," Dixon says. "We were out doing the same types of training in the community for over 10 years and needed to redesign the program."

At the same time enrollments were shrinking. Dixon and the rest of the Professional Development Center's staff were hearing from employers that new hires and potential candidates were missing key skills that professional development was not addressing — topics like problem solving, conflict resolution, and business communications.

"We were hearing that someone coming out of college can write a

text, but they can't write a business email and they don't know how to communicate in the workplace," Dixon says.

While companies were seeing a lack of skills in certain areas, they were also faced with shrinking budgets and a reduction of in-house training programs. As a consequence, increasingly they were looking for external professional development opportunities. Given the vital role that community colleges play in the region, the environment in Santa Barbara was ripe for SBCC to fill the workforce education void that companies were not able to do on their own.

It was also during this time that Dr. Melissa Moreno became Dean of Educational Programs at SBCC. In October 2014, Dr. Moreno attended a synED focus group on digital badges. Select leadership in the Santa Barbara region and special guest Das Williams, Assembly Member and Chair of the CA Assembly Higher Education Committee, met at a meeting convened by synED. This meeting provided the catalyst for Moreno to launch the digital badge initiative through the CSI. She seized the opportunity to completely reinvent the program from the ground up. She started by renaming the Professional Development Center to the Career Skills Institute, and began designing

a robust noncredit short course program, integrating leading edge concepts of digital badging and flipped classrooms.

Spurred on by synED's catalyst and under Moreno's leadership, CSI held focus groups with employers to define a set of skills they felt were most important for their employees to possess. Those skills served as the basis for the professional certificates offered as part of the badge program.

Another challenge the team faced was demonstrating to employers the value that badges bring to those who complete them. The credentials earned represent more than just a grade on a transcript or passing an exam; they demonstrate an understanding of concrete real-world skills that are applicable on the job almost immediately. To illustrate this, CSI courses utilize capstone projects that are drawn from students' real-life job experiences. For example, the following topics served as the basis for projects in the Successfully Managing and Developing People class, which is part of the Management Toolbox Certificate:

• How to create an environment where all employees feel comfortable voicing their opinions in meetings.
• Challenges associated with motivating employees who are close to retirement.
• Strategies for working with micromanagers who are putting a strain on their employees.

These topics represent just a few of many utilized in this class. Each student is responsible for generating his or her own topic based on individual workplace experiences. Students discuss these issues in groups during class and propose ideas for how to solve them. They receive feedback from instructors and from each other, culminating in completion of the course and a plan of attack for tackling the problems outlined in the projects. This is just one of many real-life applications built into CSI's programs. The CSI team plans to emphasize activities like this in discussions with employers and prospective students to drive home the value this curriculum can bring employees from all levels of a company.

Through an ongoing consultative relationship with synED's Directors Guy Smith and Scott Young, CSI gained the insight needed to design a lifecycle plan for initial development, deployment, outreach and improvement for long term sustainability and growth. Key to that design was creating an online portal for the badge program that was easily accessible by students and employers alike.

Once the badge program was implemented, CSI was also challenged to integrate the new content with its existing student information system where enrollment and registration data is housed. The system is used college-wide and was not set up to accommodate non-credit courses, but CSI staff were able to adjust business processes to make for a smooth implementation for applicants and enrolled students.

BADGE BACKGROUND

Digital badges are visual representations of skills and competencies that can be displayed on personal websites, social media profiles, or other online outlets to convey the badge holder's knowledge in a particular area. They are a rapidly growing alternative to traditional certifications. Once students complete a certificate through the CSI, they receive the badge that will stay with them no matter where they go in their career. A prospective employer can click on the badge in a LinkedIn profile or online portfolio to see exactly what classes went into it, and what skills were earned as a result of completion. This information —metadata—is one of the key criteria which distinguishes digital badges.

The badges used at SBCC are hosted by Acclaim, a product of Pearson (http://www.pearsoned. com). Acclaim's badges are linked to details on the job field related to each badge such as average starting salary and job placement rates. Students can also see job postings in that field through the badge portal. For example, a student earning a Web Designer Certificate badge could see relevant jobs in design and marketing in their area. Peter Janzow, Acclaim's Senior Director and Open Badges Lead, said the SBCC partnership represents a new direction for the company and for the idea of badges in general. Acclaim most often works directly with companies looking to offer professional development directly to employees. The partnership with SBCC is the first time that Acclaim has partnered with a community college to offer badges. Including the academic component from an accredited higher education institution gives badges a whole new level of credibility in the marketplace, Janzow says.

"Colleges are used to thinking about everything in terms of a degree. The breakthrough at CSI was to think in terms of a professional certificate," Janzow says. "From an employer's perspective, what could be easier than dealing with the local community college?"

The badges offered by SBCC are branded with the college's name, giving anyone looking at them the validation that they were issued by an accredited educational institution. Each badge correlates to a number of courses that a student passes to earn the badge. For example, the Customer Relations badge contains three short noncredit courses: The Art of Negotiating and Collaborating, Best Practices in Customer Service and Personality Style and Difficult Relationships— which must all be passed to earn the badge. A student who is awarded a badge can choose to display it in an online profile or portfolio.

PETER JANZOW
PEARSON ACCLAIM

IMPLEMENTATION

SynED worked with SBCC to build an online portal for the Career Skills Institute that integrated with its existing course catalog and with the Pearson Acclaim badge platform. CSI staff can update content for the certificate programs and list courses for each program all from the same system that's part of the South Central Coast Regional Consortium website.

The portal was designed to reduce friction and facilitate participation in the program by making the badge catalog available and searchable by skill and providing an easy way for participants and those interested to communicate with the CSI team.

Early on in their partnership, Dr. Moreno and synED realized the need for a local resource to explain what badges were. Badges are a new concept to most people and can seem unnecessary without proper explanation and context. To address this need, Moreno and Dixon compiled a list of frequently asked questions and made it available on the CSI website. The FAQ explained what badges are, how CSI's program worked, and how it would benefit prospective students. If a student liked what they saw, applying for the program or connecting with a team member was just a few clicks away.

Local branding was also important because the badges were specifically designed with the needs of Santa Barbara area businesses in mind. Employers needed to know how the certificates students earned would impact their employees' job performance. Businesses could access the course catalog and schedule to determine which classes would be the best fit for their team members.

"The confidence in the staff increased. The HR Manager had employees come up to her after the course and tell her how the class improved their skills in Excel. Their overall capabilities improved."

CSI PARTICIPANT

MARKETING

Because badges are such a new concept, the synED team was also heavily involved in marketing the CSI and its programs to prospective students and employers. Lee Yarborough, an associate of synED, reached out to 40 companies in the Santa Barbara area to set up meetings for Dixon to explain the new program and how it could benefit their employees.

Dixon and the rest of the CSI team had to come up to speed on badges and how they were going to be implemented. In a short amount of time, they learned what badges were, how students would be using them, and how they as staff would administer badges and professional certificates that went with them. The software provided by Pearson and customized by synED made the transition seamless and the day-to-day management simple for CSI staff.

SynED also assisted with outreach to prospective students. The initial response to the digital badge program has been overwhelmingly positive, with many companies asking for course catalogs or more information on how their students could get involved. Businesses were also surprised to learn that the program wouldn't cost them anything thanks to funding from the Career Technical Education Incentive Grant, the Adult Education Block Grant and the Community College funding model for noncredit programs.

"I would call employers and they were in disbelief because they loved the course titles and descriptions and, yet, there was no catch," Yarborough says. **"It's such a great program, general consensus was how could the companies sign up to get on board."**

SynED has been part of the digital badge movement since 2014 and was in the unique position to provide both thought leadership and "boots on the ground" support to launch the program.

"It's not enough just to offer digital badges, you have to find creative ways to engage the community with them," says synED Executive Director, Guy Smith. **"It's not necessarily a case of 'If you build it, they will come.' You have to vigorously promote and market to employers and individuals on an ongoing basis."**

SynED has also worked to bridge the gap between the college and the business community. The goal is to make community colleges the go-to source for relevant professional development, rather than an unchangeable ivory tower offering classes that are not relevant outside of academia. SynED found a willing partner in Acclaim, who was eager to bring its platform to a whole new audience.

"The mission of a college is to serve the community and we are giving them a new tool to bring to the table," Janzow says.

"Employees that benefit the most are the ones that have a 'whole experience', a complete mini-series. Some staff has decided to apply for a new position, make a lateral move— the HPI experience as a whole is where she sees the change."

CSI PARTICIPANT

4500+
STUDENTS SERVED SINCE FALL 2015

159
BADGES ISSUED

300
COURSES OFFERED

88
COURSES DEVELOPED

33
CERTIFICATES DEVELOPED

IMPROVEMENT

Repeated assessment, analysis, and improvement helps prevent the CSI program from falling into a stagnant state as it had done in the past. A Quality of Service survey was sent to employers and is scheduled quarterly to assess CSI performance and employer need. New certificates and/or features will be developed and marketed based on the result of that feedback. The impact of the work will be captured in the subsequent quarterly surveys.

The first survey gave CSI feedback that helped them identify problem areas which were quickly addressed to reduce the friction for those participating in the program. They also discovered many areas of opportunity and growth relating to new course and badge offerings expanding training opportunities with new and existing customers.

This cycle of identifying needs, developing and marketing solutions, and quarterly review will continue throughout the life of the program to ensure that it stays up to date with what employers need in a rapidly changing work environment. This process is highly scalable and can be applied to any institution that would implement a badge program.

RESULTS

The rebranded Career Skills Institute launched in Fall 2015. Since then, more than 1800 students have enrolled in badge programs. 76 courses are currently offered as part of 23 badge programs, with plans to continue adding courses to meet the changing needs of the modern workforce.

Badges are taken by current SBCC students who are looking to supplement their coursework, mid-career professionals who want to add to their skill set, and everyone in between. After being introduced to the program by Yarborough and Dixon, companies are also looking to badges for employee training. Onc such satisfied customer is Marlana Murdock, Training Manager for The Towbes Group, a real estate development company in Santa Barbara.

"After participating in the Management Tool Box Certificate, we noticed an immediate and significant improvement in our employees' internal communication and communication with our customers," Murdock says. "The badge courses helped our employees to expand their vision

by learning alongside others from different disciplines and industries."

The use of Acclaim's platform offers CSI staff more robust analytics than they had in their previous system. They are able to see which badges are most popular and key demographic points on the students who are earning them. This data will allow for more targeted marketing of existing programs and provide insight into what new certificates may need to be added.

As enrollments continue to grow, SBCC faculty are beginning to embrace the idea of badges and delivering their course content in a new way. CSI is also starting to leverage the popular online learning site Lynda.com in order to offer certificates in third party systems like VMware. Other programs currently in development include:

• Harness the Cloud to Maximize Performance
• Social Media for Business
• Project Management
• Enterprise Communication 2
• Emerging Leaders
• Thrive & Survive in the Workplace

Currently, CSI certificate courses can only be taken in person. Moving them online is a short-term goal as the team hears directly from prospective students who want to improve their skill sets, but who are not able to sacrifice time away from the office for professional development. CSI is also planning to launch badges as a dual enrollment program for high school students later this year.

Building on the success of the CSI pilot, synED is eager to roll the badge program out to other colleges in California and beyond. The framework is in place to implement existing badges at other institutions or to create new programs based on regional employer demand.

"SynED will be instrumental in helping to expand within SBCC and regional institutions," Smith says. "What we've created has the ability to change the way education works and how people become qualified for employment."

"Motivating for staff, they brought back activities and ice breakers to work. It was a nice break for them to get out of the office and they commented that they felt the that management appreciates them and values their professional development."
CSI PARTICIPANT

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