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Public Documentation of Tutors' Work: Digital Badges in the Writing Center

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Communication. Problem-solving. Leadership. Teamwork. These are all essential skills undergraduate peer tutors build while working in a writing center. At Purdue University, an open source web-based interface system known as Passport allows tutors to display these skills to a variety of people such as fellow students, faculty, and employers. Available at <www.openpassport.org>, Passport was developed by staff in the Information Technology at Purdue department to support interactive coursework and demonstration of competencies on our campus (Passport).[1] Recently our Writing Lab has begun using the software to document the projects tutors complete, skills they develop, and awards they receive. This documentation has led to greater visibility of tutors' professional development, as well as new opportunities for tutors to engage in the larger work of writing centers.

Discussions about undergraduate peer tutor professional development have focused on training, presenting at conferences, and creating positions of responsibility to highlight administrative work and leadership skills. Writing center directors and tutors contextualize professional development on their campuses through terminology, job titles, and rewards recognized by that institution—tangible references to the value of writing center work. Others scholars have explored how tutors acquire important workplace skills for a variety of professions, from teaching (Almasy and England, Alsup, Conard-Salvo, and Peters, among others) to systems engineering and marketing (Dinitz and Kiedaisch). The Peer Writing Tutor Alumni Research Project (PWTARP) led by Brad Hughes, Paula Gillespie, and Harvey Kail

demonstrates that tutors develop confidence, listening and analytical skills, and "skills, values, and abilities vital in their profession" (14). How do we help tutors better describe these skills and experiences to a public audience, one that includes, but isn't limited to, potential employers? Digital badges may provide one way for tutors to connect their writing center experiences to professional growth and career preparation.

During the spring 2015 semester, we implemented Passport digital badges to record our undergraduate tutors' professional development and give tutors agency to document this work publicly. Much of the professional development we documented was already happening through required training, additional mentoring, and existing leadership opportunities and positions available to all our tutors. Tutors also regularly included their writing center work on résumés, although not consistently or in ways future employers could always understand. But our overcommitted tutors often needed an extra nudge to consider branching out beyond their current one-to-one tutoring activities. Through Passport, our peer tutors now digitally highlight and track progress on current projects, and they also identify additional opportunities that they want or that have gone unnoticed.

Passport gives administrators—who can include directors, instructors, or supervisors—the ability to award digital badges upon completion of certain requirements. Tutors can then use the digital badges to display their achievements in various mediums such as LinkedIn, Mozilla Backpack, résumés, or curriculum vitae. The badges also provide proof that an individual has taken steps to develop a certain skill. Administrators set the parameters and requirements for earning badges, so badges can be customized to pedagogical and professional needs of an individual writing center and its tutors.

Passport has allowed instructors, primarily those teaching large sections in the STEM disciplines, to actively engage students and encourage them to take charge in meeting learning outcomes through a variety of activities. For example, Passport allows Purdue's students in the College of Pharmacy's drug information courses to revise assignments, take extra quizzes, and write reflections to show mastery of a certain subject within drug information. Students receive badges when they go beyond the basic requirements of coursework.

While the Passport platform is currently unique to Purdue University,[1] digital badges are becoming increasingly common at other universities and in other contexts. The Agricultural Sustainability Institute at the University of California at Davis recently developed a new major for undergraduate students that is based on earning digital badges. Instead of concentrating on credit hour-based courses, students focus more on experiential learning that provides hands-on training. The University of Illinois began issuing digital badges to employees and student workers in the Campus Information Technologies and Educational Services departments, and Penn State University is exploring digital badges in coursework and professional certificate programs. The website TripAdvisor issues badges to users as they gain experience reviewing travel sites or when they've earned helpful votes from readers. The public display of badges allows visitors to see how qualified a reviewer may be when they read the reviews for a location. Our use of Passport also allows public sharing of the many activities and skills that our tutors engage in and develop in Purdue's Writing Lab.

Although our university has a growing culture of using Passport in coursework, our writing center was among the first to begin using the software to document training, skill development, and other kinds of professional development, in a non-classroom environment. We developed individual badges for completing the required tutor training course, serving in an administrative role, completing ESL training each spring semester, leading a staff meeting, presenting at conferences, and facilitating workshops or ESL conversation groups. Many of these professional development opportunities were required activities or available to any tutor who wished to gain more experience. Passport allowed us to recognize these activities beyond our own internal paperwork or history, and we created new ways for tutors to engage with the writing center.

With Passport, what we do in the center becomes more public and accessible to others outside our own space. We can demonstrate how our work is connected to specific, recognizable learning outcomes that are visible to faculty, other parts of campus, and potential employers. Administrators create badges based on specific activities and goals, which is extremely important when connecting writing center work to a larger set of skills and accomplishments. For example, when we created badges for leading writing center staff meetings, the learning outcomes

focused on mentoring fellow tutors, leadership, and disseminating useful information—all skills that prospective employers, faculty, and others outside the writing center would recognize as useful for any career or field. Tutors are asked to submit reflections describing why they should earn the badge and what they learned when completing the requirements for the badge, along with other kinds of evidence to support how they've met the learning outcomes.

Administrators can include instructional materials, scaffold skill development, and bring in outside, subject matter experts to review badge submission requirements. Instructional materials can include writing center scholarship, links to specific websites, and other pertinent texts. Outside experts could include other writing center professionals and tutors, faculty outside one's own discipline, industry workers, or anyone else designated to review a tutor's work. Administrators can use the Instructor Workshop to design badges using modifiable templates or by uploading images they've created. While the badge image design process leaves little room for flexibility, the path to earning a badge is both flexible and customizable, as administrators can determine instructional materials, outcomes, and activities. Administrators must also identify learning goals for each badge and specify what a tutor must do to earn it, which can include required offline activities, open-ended responses such as reflections, submission of documents, or quizzes.

Fig. 1. Tutors' view for earning a badge, known as a "challenge."
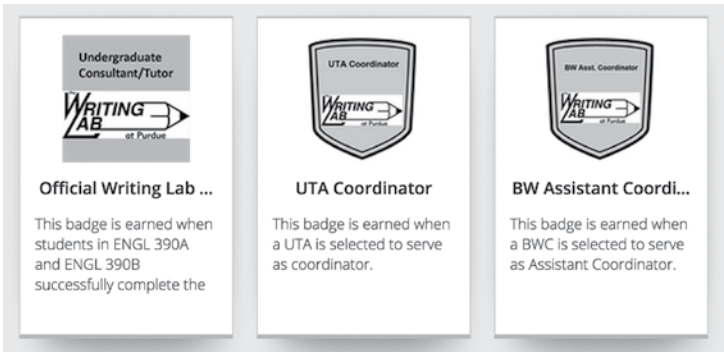
The screenshot above shows what tutors would see if they were applying for a badge to serve as an undergraduate coordinator. We ask undergraduate tutors to write a detailed personal statement that addresses what the tutor brings to the position and how serving in the position will fit with personal development

goals. We have always required such a statement for this position, so writing the statement is not an additional activity for tutors. But in the past these statements were sent via e-mail to Tammy Conard-Salvo (the Associate Director of Purdue's Writing Lab), considered as part of the hiring process, and then filed away once the undergraduate coordinator position was filled. Now, if a tutor chooses to add the undergraduate coordinator badge to a LinkedIn profile, the tutor's Passport badge will be displayed, along with any documents or activities that are required to earn the badge. In the screenshot below, visitors can see how John has displayed his Passport badges on his LinkedIn profile, including the coordinator badge and accompanying personal statement. Visitors can be assured that John met the criteria for earning the badge, and they will see the specific learning outcomes that were met (in this case, mentoring, leadership, and organizational skills).

Fig. 2. View of how a Passport badge is displayed in a LinkedIn profile.
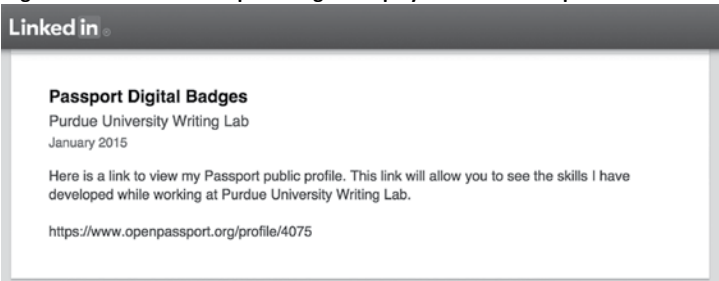
Digital badges offer several benefits to tutors. First, tutors have the opportunity to become involved in different activities beyond one-to-one tutoring. For example, tutors can earn badges for facilitating workshops and ESL conversation groups, which were activities normally reserved for our graduate tutors. Offering the badge as an extra incentive has provided additional motivation for engaging in these activities. This has led to tutors gaining experience with new projects as our writing center has increased services and expanded the roles of our undergraduate tutors. When John could not lead a staff meeting, a fellow tutor took charge, thus earning a digital badge. Later in the semester when a workshop needed to be developed, John created the content and a PowerPoint for the workshop, earning a badge. As tutors earned digital badges throughout the spring semester, they gained important problem-solving and leadership skills that will give them an advantage when they begin searching for

a job. Tutors shared in writing center administration and found tangible ways of connecting their writing center work to outside interests and career development. Displaying these specific badges allows tutors to demonstrate how seemingly specialized activities like tutoring, creating writing support materials, or working with English language learners might have broader applicability.

Passport has also given our tutors extra incentive to participate in the larger writing center community. For various reasons, very few of our undergraduate tutors would present at conferences, although we highly encouraged such activity. This past spring, several undergraduate tutors presented at the East Central Writing Centers Association (ECWCA), and they immediately applied for and displayed the digital badge for presenting at ECWCA. We also have a badge for presenting at the International Writing Centers Association, and we expect to add additional conference badges in the future. Passport provides tutors a way of highlighting academic conferences to future employers who can see a copy of tutors' presentations, which is a requirement for earning a conference badge.

When tutors graduate and begin applying for jobs, digital badges can be discussed in interviews as examples of professional development or specific experience. In an age when electronic résumés, dossiers, and networking have become increasingly common, tutors can choose how they want to publicly characterize their writing center experiences. John, for example, has begun to display Passport badges on his LinkedIn profile. These badges give him a unique advantage over many other potential applicants when applying for jobs posted on LinkedIn, when connecting with potential employers, or when employers search for and find his profile. Most LinkedIn profiles contain multiple endorsements for skills such as communication or problem-solving, and John's profile displays endorsements for volunteering and collaboration. Unfortunately, the only people who can discuss how these endorsements were earned are the endorsers, and potential employers have to trace through the networks to see the expertise of the endorsers. Endorsing a connection requires a simple click of a button. No criteria, learning outcomes, or challenges are needed, and the endorsement process can be subjective or arbitrary. Consequently, LinkedIn endorsements may not be sufficient on their own. Employers want to see proof of what applicants have done to gain com-

munication skills or problem-solving skills. Passport badges provide that proof by displaying specific academic and professional development activities that were completed or leadership roles that led to earning a badge or developing a skill. Thus, potential employers can read about completed activities required to earn the badges rather than just depending on a single-click opinion of a certain skill set.

Most importantly, the idea for using Passport came from John: our use of digital badges wasn't an idea imposed by writing center administrators but an idea generated by an undergraduate tutor who wanted to support professional development among his co-workers. This peer-led focus has brought enthusiasm to the project and generated interest among our tutors as Passport use has become a new way for them to document their Writing Lab work. John had wanted his fellow tutors to play a larger role in our writing center, and after seeing the advantages of digital badges in the College of Pharmacy, he shared his ideas with Tammy. As tutors started to hear about Passport, they offered ideas for digital badges. Proposing badges created a unique opportunity for tutors because they identified how their professional development needs could be met, and they demonstrated how their work helped them gain experience or build skills.

Margaret Marshall's 2001 essay, titled "Sites for (Invisible) Intellectual Work," discusses the difficulty of demonstrating the intellectual work of writing center administration:

> While I believe it is possible to argue that tutoring in a writing center is intellectual work, it is the work of directing a writing center that usually causes more difficulty because of the time it requires, its apparent disconnection from either research or teaching, and directors' need to establish the framework within which their work is evaluated. (75)

However, describing the intellectual work of tutoring and that of tutors can still be difficult, as evidenced by the misunderstandings that some writers and faculty have (cue every narrative about students requesting proofreading help or faculty complaining about poorly written documents even after a tutoring session). Research like PWTARP empirically demonstrated what many writing center directors and tutors suspected and saw in everyday practice. The challenge has been in sharing and describing this work to an outside audience beyond a few sentences in a tutor's resume or CV—and in helping tutors leverage their writing center experiences early on, prior to graduation

and employment. We hope that Passport will give our tutors a new space to think about and describe this work to potential employers. The use of Passport in our university's courses and its use of learning outcomes can further strengthen the intellectual activities in which tutors engage: collaborative learning, critical thinking, mentoring, leadership, and written and oral communication, just to name a few. Passport can also support the intellectual work of writing center administration by connecting the work to teaching through learning outcomes. The increased use of Passport on our campus gives us a shared space and language to connect writing center work to other recognizable intellectual activities.

1. Passport™ developers are looking for a limited number of outside partners to beta test the system on their own campuses. For more information, please visit <itap.purdue.edu/studio/passport> and <openpassport.org/BetaRequest/Create>.

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