



Harper College

## Harper College's Continuing Education department strengthens program credibility with digital badges

### OVERVIEW

Harper College is situated in the Northwest suburbs of Chicago, Illinois, and serves approximately 40,000 credit and non-credit students, annually. Named for Dr. William Rainey Harper, a pioneer in the junior college movement in the United States, the college is one of the largest community colleges in Illinois. The college has grown exponentially since opening its doors in 1967. In addition to a 200-acre main campus, Harper holds classes at two off-site campuses and continues to expand through its online course offerings.

While Harper's academic departments prepare students for professional success through its career and transfer programs, the Continuing Education (CE) department serves students with short-term career training and personal enrichment programs. Many of the CE career programs are approved for vocational non-transferable college credit, while the enrichment programs are most often offered as non-credit Continuing Education Units (CEUs). The age of CE career program learners typically range from 40-55 years old.

According to a 2013 report from the U.S. Department of Labor, 65% of today's school-age children will eventually find themselves in jobs and professions that do not currently exist. Four-year institutions and community colleges are under increasing pressure to keep up with the training and technologies that impact the global workforce. While Harper's academic departments keep up with these changes, the Continuing Education department is able to develop and implement new programs more quickly due to state and local academic approval processes.

This case study examines the top challenges Harper College has faced around workforce training and how its Continuing Education department utilizes digital badges to address those challenges.

## CHALLENGES

In considering workforce training, Harper College's Continuing Education department faced two related challenges:

- Distinguish itself from Harper's academic program counterparts
- Strengthen its program credibility with employers

### **Creating a distinction between Continuing Education and academic programs**

Like many academic institutions, Harper College relied on a certificate-based system to recognize course completions. Certificates were awarded by both the Continuing Education department and academic programs, which led to confusion across both departments.

### **Strengthening program credibility**

Adult learners engage with the Continuing Education department to skill-up and advance their professional opportunities. But employers lacked an understanding of the depth of training and resulting outcomes driven by the non-degree programs at Harper. Employers were unable to easily access course criteria and accurately evaluate the value of the skills produced by Harper's Continuing Education career training programs.

## SOLUTION

To address these challenges, the Continuing Education department investigated alternatives to awarding certificates to adult learners who had completed career courses and programs. After much research, the CE department discovered a new credentialing technology: digital badges.

Digital badges are a web-enabled representation of an individual's skills and competencies. Badges provide in granular detail the depth of learning acquired through training and other coursework. They can be shared electronically, without losing context or evidence, which makes the data contained within more accessible in more settings than a traditional certificate.

In order to determine the features required of a badging platform, Harper met with its IT department to map the overall scope of the project; collaborated with program coordinators to correlate program requirements with badge types; and worked with team members to create an RFP.

The most important features of a badging platform surfaced as:

- Advanced features, including a mobile-first user experience
- Prior experience with issuing badges for higher education institutions
- Dedicated support for badge program setup and training of Harper's staff

Harper College chose Credly's Acclaim platform as its badge provider because it met these core feature criteria. In addition, Credly's Acclaim platform offers labor market insights which map skills associated with Harper's badges to employers across the world.

## Harper and Credly's Acclaim Platform

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Given the amount of metadata required for each badge, Continuing Education made a strategic decision to issue its initial badges for vocational non-transferable college credit. These programs follow similar requirements as credit-bearing courses, have the most details attached to them, and have built-in assessments of student learning. They were a good fit for getting the badge launch up and running.

During the badge building process, the Continuing Education department worked with the platform's technical staff to determine how the digital badges would integrate with Harper's student tracking system, Banner. Continuing Education also collaborated with internal partners to consider which other systems might be impacted.

Finally, Continuing Education worked with Credly and Harper College's marketing team to create the visual design for the badges. Once the design was complete, Harper began to market the value and purpose of the badges to staff, students and employers.

One example of Harper's marketing efforts is a two-sided business card that was provided to students. The card served as a reminder of how to accept the badge.

## Mapping Employability

Through labor market insights on the Credly Acclaim platform, students can use their badges—and the individual skills mapped to those badges—to search for jobs that require their capabilities. Students can use the labor market insights to find jobs based on:

- Location
- Salary ranges
- Top job functions
- Top job titles
- Top employers

Harper College also can use this information to understand which skills are most in-demand by employers and adapt course curricula and learning pathways to ensure student employability in the future.

## Conclusions

When badges are used to represent classroom and extracurricular learning outcomes, graduating students can more easily connect their college experience to employer needs. Employers can more readily identify specific in-demand skills in candidates, and colleges and universities have a tool that simplifies communication and planning around curricula and skills gaps.

In less than one year of badging with Credly's Acclaim platform, Harper College's Continuing Education department issued nearly 1,000 badges from a catalog of over 50 different badge types. Their badges recognize skills and learning outcomes that create professional opportunities for Harper College students in a way that makes it easy for employers to instantly recognize and value their capabilities.



## Empower Your Learners

Credly connects the knowledge, skills, and abilities learners develop with employer demand. Learning and career pathways become more clear with digital credentials, and learners become more engaged, leading to increased persistence.

To learn more about empowering your learners with digital credentials, contact Credly.

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