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College Credentials in the Digital Future White Paper

Tyler McNally: Functionalist and Conflict Theories of Accreditation

In the first several weeks of the EDF winter session, Professor Stevens introduced two social science theories which can be useful lenses through which the class could understand the role of accreditation and credentialing, the focus of Weeks 3, 4, and 5.

Accreditation and credentialing are so integral to our educational system (and have been for hundreds of years) that most people seem to take them for granted. For example, how many students could name the accreditor their university is certified by? How many students know the basics of the accreditation process? Perhaps it's similar to buying a piece of organic fruit at the supermarket. We see the stamp and pay the premium, but how many of us know the processes, systems and evaluation methods required for a producer to get that stamp? If we did take the time to evaluate the process, would our view of the stamp change? Would our views also change if we were confronted with different types of organic certifications or produce that provided detailed information about its provenance, but did not include a certification?

Evaluating the current system of accreditation and credentialing, comparing this system with new options and viewing all of these through the lenses of Functionalist and Conflict theories enabled the class to develop new insights about the pros/cons of the current system and potential opportunities and pitfalls for the future.

Let's begin with the theories. Anita Varma suggests that a functionalist perspective would "argue that accreditation facilitates a system in which the best and the brightest are easily identifiable and move through the appropriate

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institutions. Average folks are filtered into average institutions, and so on." Further, "the functionalist perspective would argue that accreditation enables and buttresses an efficient system for education to churn out a spectrum of workers, for all kinds of work."

Based on these objectives, accreditors would need to focus on specific types of activities and roles. For example, as Hannah Miller Rich noted, accreditors would need to "ensure that all schools deliver equally high quality education using data-driven and outcomes-based strategies that guarantee optimized student learning." In carrying out these activities, Accreditors take on an important role in the college system. They are the "check and balance... that supervises one of the most important facets of this country," the human capital development and use system.

The conflict perspective yields a very different picture. From this vantage point, accreditation can be seen as "a means by which power is preserved by certain groups of society and denied to others," says Hallie Fox. "Rather than seeing each individual as meaningful, conflict theorists view education more in zero-sum terms. There are only so many credentials to be offered and so many powerful positions in society to be had — everyone can't possibly be equal. Credentials legitimate the position of certain individuals at the exclusion of others."

Consequently, accreditors focus on different types of activities and roles. Hannah notes that accreditors will need to "perpetuat[e] inequality by maintaining the illusion that traditional education is the only way to prove intelligence and competence." Since, "higher education is significantly correlated with professional success, yet access to a four-year $200,000 education is accessible to very few," it's important for accreditors, that all stakeholders (students, employers, universities, policy makers, etc.), "[continue] to judge an individual's merit by their ability to attend an accredited university." In doing so, conflict theorists would see accreditors as " continuing a long history of structural inequality."

As Hallie Fox notes, this credential (and the accreditation process underpinning it) has been "generally unquestioned by society at large... as a legitimate way to sort, classify, reward, and create a stable population of capable workers." In the rest of this paper, we look at how current and emerging forms of teaching, credentialing and accreditation are changing the landscape and dynamics of the college credential.

Liam Aiello: Responses to the Credentialing Panel

Week 5 of our EDF winter session brought together four panelists to discuss college credentialing in education's digital future. The panelists — Richard Arum (NYU professor of ed and sociology), Therese Cannon (WASC), Emily Goligoski (Mozilla Open Badge Initiative), and John Katzman (2Tor, Noodle, and Princeton Review) — all offered insights and challenges to the current model of college credentialing in the United States, and our class was more than willing to engage with, and offer further challenges to, these ideas.

One major theme to emerge on the discussion boards arose from Richard Arum's indictment of the rituals of college certification — specifically, he referenced the lax and varying adherence to the rules of the credit hour across institutions and lecture halls — and how universities must be held more accountable for student learning should they desire to maintain their credentials and federal aid funding, and also to justify their cost.

The notion of how best to hold universities to higher standards for student outcomes sparked diverse debate on the forum. Karen Kindler noted: "In his remarks, Richard Arum talked about how the credentialing process for institutions, which, in theory, should be a legitimizing agent was, in practice, seemingly ceremonial and thus, a sham. He suggests that the accreditation organizations, which should play a significant regulatory role in the credentialing of institutions, have come to accept their largely symbolic roles, and are abetting an increasingly dysfunctional system. This ineffective system is entrenched within the higher education framework and its influence in it is pervasive through

rules and norms."

Molly Bullock followed up with some observations about Arum's criticism of universities' uses of performance assessments, and his advocacy, instead, for more extensive use of value-added assessments of student learning: "Arum decried performance assessments as the solution to this systemic problem because of their intrinsic link to prior aptitude and achievement. According to Arum, the solution lies in value added assessments, those that can measure student growth over time through repeated administration of an assessment...I wonder though, whether value added assessments are the best solution for the US credentialing system. Will gains scores become the new measurement of a credit hour? Who is going to write the assessments that define what knowledge is in any given domain and can they write, revise, and publish these assessments fast enough to meet the constantly changing demands of the workforce?"

Molly went on to offer an alternative vision to value added approaches, embodied by University Now, http://unow.com/, and its commitment to, and assurances of, quality higher education: "They offer self-paced courses at two universities. The model for earning a degree is completely competency based and as such they take their assessment creation very seriously. They offer students resources and personal learning analytics that indicate assessment readiness and also allow students to challenge the end of course assessment whenever they are ready...Through a disaggregated faculty model, they are able to counsel students individually based on their learning outcomes and profiles. Also because of this unbundled model, evaluators are separate from teachers and advisors and dedicated solely to creating and administering assessments that test desired learning outcomes."

Manmeet Mavi echoed Molly's challenge to value-added assessment, and offered up a space for considering what "deteriorating student learning" in relation to increases in access to "broad-based education and the benefits it accords": "Richard Arum's remarks on performance based assessment seem to have been motivated to increase the learning outcomes. I agree with Molly's

comments that value added assessment is not an improvement over performance-based assessment. Value-added assessment is not only difficult to measure (as pointed above by Molly), but also fails to capture minimum proficiency achieved or objectively compare proficiency of various students. I personally believe the credentialing system in its current form is adequate and only lacks flexibility when it comes to determining criteria for granting degree/diploma."

Hannah Miller Rich, alternatively, pushed for higher accountability from colleges and universities, offering a personal view of how the immense financial cost of higher education demands higher expectations for outcomes: "For the amount that college costs, and the way in which this cost stratifies achievement based upon socioeconomic status, I find the lack of student learning appalling. I think that we need to step back and think about the purpose of higher education today — what do we want students to gain? How do we want them to grow? I deeply believe that young people need to explore, ask big questions, be confused and develop their own values. I do not think that higher education that costs $50,000 is the right place for this...I hope that the conversation on value-added assessment does not lead to a narrow conception of achievement or learning, but allows for a critical discussion on what, how and why students are learning what they learn in higher education."

And Meaghan Stern, in a post entitled "What DO Credentials Mean?," extended the conversation about standards for higher education even further, drawing insightful parallels — and cautions — between the standards movement in K-12 education and what might be in store for universities: "Arum's talk made me wonder what happens to this underlying assumption if a person has a degree but no skill?...In higher education accreditation, there is a push to standardize education and curriculum to ensure that graduates have comparable skills across different states and school systems. If this is the path that higher education is to follow, I think we need to learn from some of the byproducts and consequences of recent K-12 developments. Will standardization lead to more

breadth/requirements and less depth/involvement in study? Will teacher and professor evaluation replace student development as the focus?...There are many more parallels in the struggles faced by K-12 and Higher Ed than we sometimes acknowledge. The current difference is that in K-12 we focus on teacher accountability. In Higher Ed, it seems that we are still trying to figure out where to place the locus of responsibility for outcomes."

For other students on the forum, the question of the accrediting agencies themselves raised some thought-provoking comments. Therese Cannon, former executive associate director at WASC, offered an appraisal of the patchwork of accreditation agencies that operate across the United States, indicating that varying criteria for accrediting universities led to a system of loosely-defined certifications that were often incompatible with larger universities. This notion sparked a conversation between Matt Williams and Max Alexander around the question, What's stopping Stanford from becoming an accrediting body itself? Writes Matt: "What's stopping Stanford (or other brand name universities) from getting into the accreditation business?...It has the resources to assemble committees, federal panels, accreditation experts, and education scholars to reflect and review applications from online colleges that want the consulting expertise to run rigorous educational programs. It could play a significant role in shaping the discourse of online education, even funneling some high-achieving students directly into its own programs."

Max Alexander responded: "Would Stanford, or a similar university be more interested in getting into the business of accreditation, or be likely to actually consider whether or not it still needs its own WASC accreditation? (Falls along the same lines of the university as the quasi sovereign — could a place like Stanford fully function outside of the purview of the US government's grant dollars?)… An elite university would rather rid themselves of the pressure to release their student learning data (possibly coming down the road from an institution like WASC), and allow themselves to reframe what comprises their accreditation standards. These standards would likely align themselves with the information that the university is already paying top dollar to promote and display

to the world: number of Nobel prize winners, average employment/salaries of graduates, famous alumni, successes of sports teams, etc....In referring to the recent changes in the criteria that WASC uses to evaluate post-secondary institutions, [Therese] mentioned that WASC is now looking at the extent to which universities are 'doing good work', something that would differentiate them from the for-profit universities that are dedicated 'solely to the pursuit of profit'."

John Katzman, of 2Tor, Noodle, and the Princeton Review, spoke about the relationship between universities and content providers, and the urge in a competitive, outcomes-based environment to incentivize the gaming of these outcomes — short-term outcomes that prioritize, say, online content, to benefit institutions at the expense of long-term learning goals that universities should aspire to articulate, measure, and achieve.

Tyler McNally responded with a comment about higher education having a vested interest in maintaining a "status quo": "I initially laughed when John Katzmann showed the picture of kid with hundreds of badges covering his body. But the more I thought about it, the more I considered his choice to show that image in light of Richard Arun's comments about higher education's position as a "mature, successful industry." It seems self-evident that higher education, in general, and prestigious universities, more specifically, have a large vested interest in the status quo. Then it also must be true that the suppliers to the mature, successful industry are also equally vested…Princeton Review, 2U, and Noodle… I think all of those business are amazing and valuable, but they reinforce and rely on the status quo."

Anita Varma responded as well, elucidating her standpoint on the need to establish a better articulation of the purposes of higher education in terms of what its future might hold: "Overall, I left the panel thinking that there was a latent conflation of what the purpose of education has been with what the future of education should be. If the purpose of education in the past has been to prepare a strong mass of worker bees for the jobs that a corporation-dominated market creates, the future of education does not need to take that purpose as a given.

There are systematic limitations to both the education system and labor force as they exist now. Maintaining fidelity to long-standing values and norms may be a cautious approach, to avoid "breaking the educational system as you reinvent it," as one speaker said. However, maintaining values of the existing system of education warrants a closer examination of what these values and norms are — and whose interests they serve — in order to envision a future system that substantively disrupts rather than replicating the disparities and shortcomings that exist in the current system."

Karen Kindler: Synthesis of Piazza Posts on Badges

Credentialing and accreditation are crucial features of our current educational system. Both the high school diploma and the college degree are widely recognized standards by which graduates are sorted into jobs and other social positions, and by which we, as a society, certify that certain skills and knowledge are reproduced over time. The current credentialing system developed as a series of negotiated contracts between particular schools sharing similar prestige and status. These courtesy agreements are now being challenged by potentially seismic changes to the political economy of U.S. higher education. Such paradigm shifts create opportunity for reimagining academic credit and accreditation.

One such opportunity is the example of the open-source badging system, which offers a potentially useful way to signal a student's or candidate's abilities. Alternative credentials could create a mess of unintelligible micro-credentials, but on the other hand, they could also provide a more granular, clear, and normatively "accurate" signal about a candidate's qualifications. Yet who will be responsible for "curating" the badges into larger suites of knowledge areas?

Some suggest that tech-based companies like Google, Cisco, Facebook, or perhaps a MOOC will certify a sequence of badges as their "programming diploma" for example. The argument is as employers with specialized needs that aren't totally satisfied by current credentials, tech companies should have a vested interest in exploring and examining the richest sources of badging

content. This is an important point because the value of the diploma or "curated set of badges" depends more on the perceived credibility of the issuer.

Yet there are increasingly similar attributes between the developing open-sourced credentialing system such as badges and traditional degree granting systems. In a typical degree-granting system, lower-level performance metrics such as tests, assignments, and projects are accumulated into course grades; the credits or units for those courses form a bachelor's degree. Most four-year universities issue a B.S. in a subject based on 30-40 "common core" units, 40-50 in other requirements, and 20-30 in electives. Thus, considering for differences in general education fulfillments, two students could complete only half of their ~180 units with the same classes, yet both earn a B.S. in the same subject from the same university. To categories learning and streamline education, administrative progressives designed the credit system as a mechanism to track, sort, award, credential, and granting degrees. The degree is chunked into a single informational unit on a CV or application, and few people who see it afterwards know what went behind it. For better or worse, the degree offers a signal about the student's ability, without delving into the lower-level details of his or her learning process.

To become useful to outsiders there are those who argue that any open-sourced credentialing system will need a meaningful method to "chunk" lower-level skills into higher-level competencies and serve as a mechanism for establishing trust and cooperation between people. And that's where badging's similarities to the black box of traditional degree granting systems come in. As a proxy for a student's ability, badges, like degrees, signal learning has occurred. It is in the same category as a college degree, social signal, technical certification, or recommendation letter. Badges for online courses serve as a stamp of approval for completed work without knowing what went into it. Call badges the administrative progressive's 2.0 in online education. Same problem yet again — increasing educational access to an ever increasing diverse population of students — and our solution seems to be exactly the same: credentials — a mimetic response.

Given the promise of innovative technologies we can do better than the administrative progressives did a more than a century ago. If digital learning is supposed to revolutionize education, then we come up with ways to revolutionize credentialing. The more codified and parameterized the activity, the less its value to predict metacognitive skills such as creativity or initiative. A black-boxed credential can't fully measure what employers or application committees want to know: Could this person identify the most important questions to research? Can they follow self-imposed deadlines? Can this person solve problems that don't have a protocol — can they catch the curveballs? Can they synthesize today's ideas with that class from two years ago?

Perhaps we should be thinking about different domains in education being disrupted in different ways rather than all of higher education being disrupted in the same way. How can a badging credentialing system serve the needs of Google and Facebook vs. the needs of Exxon Mobile or General Electric? Is this a false dichotomy? For this reason among others, the need to unbundle college delivery is enormous.

In talking about badges we would be remiss to not mention gamification's influence in possibly creating a new paradigm for badging certification and credentialing. Some are concerned about this movement and caution if gamification attributes are being introduced to badging, the badges shouldn't be an end to themselves or their own reward. They question: Where are we going with this attempt to gamify and badge-ify education? Does making learning about credentials work? Sure. People are motivated by badges, degrees, grades, credit hours, etc. (are badges that different from grades?). But is that really what we want? Do we really want to encourage people to "game" the system more than we already do? Wouldn't we rather make learning about learning? Aren't the best educative experiences like the best games: fun, challenging, imaginative, innovative, and inspiring? The best learning experiences share a key thing with the best gaming experiences: Players and learners would have participated in them whether they received "credit" or not. Badges can adulterate the gaming and learning experience in that they allow the game or learning designer to be

lazy, don't make a good game or learning experience, and just trick the player or student into playing or learning by giving her a badge. Gamification works, but it leaves no one satisfied.

Others are more supportive of and confident in badging's capabilities in enhancing the learning experience in the education schema. They argue that we attend schools in large part to keep us on track and earn credentials and badges. There is a motivational piece to the badge that many may identify with — similar to the way learners derive nuanced motivations to pursue more learning from their varying esteem for instructors, grades, their classmates, etc. We could certainly learn without schools (in fact, we do all the time) but it would be tough to keep pace without the structure pushing us forward. If gamification makes the process a bit more enjoyable, then all the more power to the new technology, badges and all.

Schooling and learning are not the same. Learning can certainly happen in schools, but many go through the system and have little to show for it, so why not go the distance and make the classroom a game as well — at least the latter game has the potential to engage, teach, and motivate (we all want badges).

Finally, from the Open Badges FAQ website comes the question, "Will badges expire?," and its answer: "It will depend on the individual badge. Issuers can set expiration dates with each badge that they issue and that information will be carried with the badge. Issuers might choose to do so for skills that need to be refreshed or are quickly outdated. Through the Open Badge Infrastructure, when someone tries to use or share a badge that has expired, the OBI
will convey that the badge is expired."

The conception is striking because in thinking about our traditional notion of the degree, a brick-and-mortar bestowed diploma ensures some degree of lifelong recognition for whatever efforts were made to cobble together the learning experiences required to achieve it. No "best if used by" date was attached — although it was perhaps implied.

There is a badge that is familiar to many educators: their teaching credential, and the requirement in most cases to renew or bolster it as part of

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one's professional obligations to improved practice. Yet there are frank opinions that teaching professionals express when it comes to renewing this badge: graduate class, more money, and more time in professional development that they would prefer to spend elsewhere. Certainly, many educators cherish the opportunity to grow professionally, but it doesn't negate the externally-applied obligation to assure they do so.

In what ways might badge issuers determine their requirements for renewal? How this might be applied, ideally, to instill a sense that certain practices and knowledge merit regular re-acquaintance, and that an external reminder must be issued so that this re-revisiting of learning occurs? Pragmatically, it should also be considered that other forces might compel a badge issuer to manipulate renewal requirements, and how learners might reevaluate their pursuit of such a badge as a result.

Certainly, these ruminations can apply to all realms of credentialing – from the CPR certification that rescuers renew every year to the "lifelong benefits bestowed" by a prestigious university's diploma to the un-referred choices of an open badge issuer on Mozilla. But the questions still remain: how does one determine the life-span of a badge; should an expiration date be attached? And what ways is this determination subject to the whims of those who hold nuanced views of the virtues of ongoing learning, combined with the opportunities to capitalize on this process, or further gamify it in the digital realm?