

“Insurgent Credentials: A Challenge to Established Institutions of Higher Education?”*

Michael R. Olneck
Departments of Educational Policy Studies and Sociology
University of Wisconsin-Madison

olneck@education.wisc.edu

May 3, 2012

DRAFT. FOR COMMENTS ONLY. PLEASE DO NOT CITE, COPY, OR OTHERWISE
CIRCULATE WITHOUT AUTHOR’S PERMISSION.

*Revision of a “provocation” prepared for presentation at a conference on “Education in a New Society: The Growing Interpenetration of Education in Modern Life,” Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, April 26-27, 2012.

This paper establishes the need to develop sociological explanations for recent developments of certification of skill and knowledge mastery as possible substitutes for, or supplements to, conventional college and university degrees. It also calls for sociologists to attempt to anticipate the impact of these developments on the configuration of U.S. higher education.

An organized, well-financed effort to develop on-line certification of knowledge and skills is underway (see *e.g.*, O’Shaughnessy, 2011; Watters, 2011; Carey, 2012; Crotty, 2012; Young, 2012*b*). The effort enjoys foundation, government, and even university support. The effort is championed by some as a challenge to the monopoly on credentialing held by conventional degree-granting institutions. Some of these efforts, such as MIT certifying completion of the open source courses it offers, extend, rather than circumscribe, the reach of university authority (Parry, 2012). Another, “Learning Counts” (www.learningcounts.org; see Glenn, 2011) offer “[c]ollege credit for what you already know[®],” and so maintains the significance of collegiate certification, even as it embraces non-traditional learning. The most ambitious effort, Mozilla’s Open Badge project (<http://openbadges.org/en-US/>), envisions the evolution of an ever-expanding “ecosystem” in which numerous organizations assess and certify specific skills, competencies, and knowledge, and issue “badges” testifying to what the badge-holder has mastered or displayed. The badges could be used in lieu of degrees to represent one’s qualifications to prospective employers and others (Watters, 2011). The effort has drawn the notice of, among others, the *Wall Street Journal* (Young, 2012*a*).

Sociologically, among the most interesting aspects of the Mozilla effort are that it entails exceptionally weak classification of knowledge (Bernstein, 1971); it “counts” learning of many kinds which are acquired beyond formal education institutions, including interpersonal skills and experiences (*e.g.*, mentorship) and “new skills and literacies” (Mozilla, n.d.); it proliferates and disperses authority over what learning to recognize; and it provides a means of translation and commensuration across multiple spheres.

While explanation of the *emergence* of alternative certification is important, I think that this development poses an especially opportune challenge to our predictive and forecasting prowess. We should ask what our theoretical apparatus and our cumulated knowledge would

lead us to expect for the further development of alternative certification in the coming decades, and the implications of those anticipated developments for the configuration of formal education, especially higher education, and for the ways in which education interpenetrates other social spheres (Davies & Mehta, 2011).

In a period of credential inflation, in which a degree has become both more necessary for occupational attainment and less certain in yielding economic rewards, as well as more costly to individuals, along with escalating collective costs to providing higher education, we should have, on the basis of historical patterns (Collins, 1981), expected the critique of higher education with which we are all by now familiar. Whether we should have anticipated the emergence of the kind of alternative pathways to certification that I am discussing is another matter. Prevailing accounts of the role of credentials in status competition anticipate an “irreversible” “spiral of competition for educational attainment and rising credential requirements for jobs” in which “self-consciously alternative forms of education end up emulating the credentialed (*sic*) pattern of mainstream education...” (Collins, 2011 [2002], 233). On the other hand, Collins earlier observed that when the limits of credential inflation are reached “[c]heaper or nonformalized means of acquiring culture spring up: rival schools with shorter courses or no formal (state-sanctioned) certificates...” (1981, 194).

The proposed alternatives to credentialing by college degrees challenge not only the existing credentialing system, but also sociological theories which assume that education attainment is merely a symbolic positional good, and that education credentials certify primarily prestige, not practical skills (Collins, 1981). Rather, the proposed alternatives are predicated on the validity of aspects of human capital theory, the tenets of which many sociologists are prone to dismiss, *e.g.*, that acquired skills and knowledge contribute importantly to worker productivity (Baker, 2009).

A system of badges challenges the function of higher education as society’s primary “sieve” (Stevens et al., 2008). It also appears to challenge the widely- and deeply-institutionalized idea of the primacy of formal schooling as a source of authoritative competence in modern societies (Meyer, 1977; Baker, 2011*a,b*). This challenge has two aspects.

First, a system of credentials institutionalized in hierarchically ranked degrees certifies

people. The institutions which the system comprises charter identities (Meyer, 1969) and “consecrate” elites (Bourdieu, 1996 [1989]), “incubate” social ties and acquisition of cultural capital (Stevens *et al.*, 2008), and establish recognized boundaries between individuals that are based on institutions attended and degrees attained (Bourdieu, 1996 [1989]). A system that comprises a myriad of badges signifying discrete accomplishments and characteristics may provide employers with useful and cheap signals of prospective employees’ capacities *if* employers can specify limited and specific qualities they are seeking, *and* if badges corresponding to those qualities are feasible. It will not, however, classify people into distinguishable categories according to their relationship to the “culture of academic intelligence that is at the heart of the schooled society” (Baker, 2009, 179). It will not produce “graduates,” although some of its proponents envision different levels of badges, and the aggregation of multiple badges into “meta badges” (Mozilla Open Badges; see also <http://www.khanacademy.org/about>).

Second, a system of badges as a substitute for college and university degrees challenges the role of highly stratified (Young, 1998) and institutionally legitimated (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977 [1970]) “academic” knowledge in the reproduction of cultural capital and in social reproduction more generally. However, we have already moved far from the time when the universities were among the custodians of a seemingly coherent body of venerated knowledge with which elites were inculcated, and non-elites were taught, in lower levels of schooling, to respect. This can be seen, for example, in the substitution of composition courses for literature courses (Guillory, 1993).¹ Furthermore, while originating outside of universities, within universities there has been a growing “genericism,” that is an orientation toward generic skills that “are assumed to apply to all subjects, all regions, all fields of practices and all levels” (Beck & Young, 2005, 190), and which are linked to “trainability” (Bernstein, 2000, 59; cited in Beck & Young, 2005, 191). The system of badges described above encompasses both very specific skills and generic skills. We can view the open-ended proliferation of badges that is envisioned

¹ The substitution of composition for literature did not altogether eliminate the university’s “social function of producing a distinction between a basic and more elite language (Guillory, 1993, 80), but the “invasion” from the bottom by field-specific “sociolects” did “militate against the formation of a new [linguistic] standard,” and led to lateral competition as much as to vertical hierarchization (*ibid.*, 81).

as part of a continuing fragmentation of the cultural market that is evident even within the university.

We are left to ask what the future holds for alternative credentialing, and what effects this will have on the institutions of higher education which we have now? We are left to ask, as well, what theories to apply in prospectively addressing these questions.

Human capital theory, along with screening and signaling theories (see Bills, 2003), would lead us to expect that the success of badges as a credentialing system in supplanting degrees will depend upon the information needs of employers, the validity of the information conveyed by badges, the efficiency and practicality of prospective employees acquiring badges, and the efficiency and practicality of prospective employers utilizing them. Kevin Carey of Education Sector predicts that the catalyst to the acceptability of alternative credentialing will be “when some large, authoritative organization, like the government or a current member of the Dow Jones Industrial Average, compares the skills and performances of people with traditional degrees to those bearing certificates from Khan, Udacity, and credential-granters yet to come. If the latter can get the job done, they’ll hire accordingly, and then everything will start to change” (Carey, 2012).² David Wiley, an associate professor of instructional psychology and technology at Brigham Young University, put it even more enthusiastically, “As soon as big employers everywhere start accepting these new credentials, either singly or in bundles, the gig is up completely” (Young, 2012*b*).

Alternative credentialing systems, including badges, may advance the allocation of individuals into positions on the basis of verified skills and identifiable qualities acquired outside of higher education. If such a system of allocation were to develop, and if those skills and qualities were to demonstrably enhance organizational performance, even prominent neo-institutionalist theorists concede that “the authority of higher education would be greatly weakened” (Meyer *et al.*, 2005, 31).

Based on the organizational interests of existing higher education institutions, we would

² One skeptic points out that a proliferation of badges from multiple issuers will not simplify the task of finding capable employees, and that employers are “going to want to collapse the diversity of badges into some simple, summative credential” (Bissell, n.d.). Bissell suspects that the present trend “will actually entrench employee interest in identifying people with ‘generic’ degrees much like college degrees function now.”

expect, along the lines argued by Davies and Mehta's (2011) discussion of "accommodating logic," that lower tier institutions, for example, community colleges, if they lose students to alternative credentialing systems, will attempt to emulate or incorporate those systems within their own boundaries by, for example, offering credits for non-course learning, offering short courses which would award badges of their own, or institutionally vouching for the badges awarded by other providers. Whether non-elite four-year institutions will follow suit, or will contract, or will persist unaffected, depends upon whether their own degrees hold up under competitions from alternative systems of credentialing, and whether state support, and family and student tuition payments, can be sustained.

Badges may predictably become recognized as "alternatives" to degrees, which, like on-line degrees now, will, at least initially, be subject to suspicion and denigration (Adams & DeFleur, 2006), much like "alternative" curricula in secondary schools whose status as "alternative" derives from their relation to the "hegemonic curriculum" (Connell *et al.*, 1982). In this sense, while badges will not classify people in the ways degrees do, being a badge-holder rather than a college graduate will represent a categorical identity. Alternatively (no pun intended), the expanded acceptance of badges in lieu of degrees would be consistent with critiques that question whether a "holistic and objective field of social distinctions" (Hall, 1992, 257-258) obtains in the United States.³

The most interesting question is the effect of alternative credentialing on upper-tier institutions. Collins argues that for existing education institutions to combat credential inflation by "attempting to eliminate superfluous activities and concentrate on the allegedly practical content which is supposed to be credentialized ... is to a certain extent artificial, given that the value of the degree is its symbolic legitimation vis-a-vis the prevailing standard of education in the population" (2011 [2002], 236). From this, we would expect top-tier institutions to attempt to symbolically exaggerate their distinctiveness from other education and credentialing sectors, and to reinforce their ties to elite segments in the population, who by their very attendance at these institutions, and their recruitment from the graduates of elite institutions, contribute to these

³ The fate of substituting badges in lieu of degrees in different countries might offer a test of national variability in the degree of the unification of cultural markets.

institutions' standing. This, however, does not appear at all to be what M.I.T. is doing (Carey, 2012). While M.I.T. is a technical institute, this nevertheless suggests that elite institutions may seek to expand their reach by entering new markets, rather than seek to preserve their status by reinforcing their boundaries.

A different interpretation of alternative credentialing systems than I have been offering is that while they challenge the credentialing monopoly of conventional higher education institutions, they *expand*, rather than contract, the “school forms” about which Davies and Mehta write (2011). Instead of contesting and supplanting the institutionalization of “recognizable instructor and student roles, curricula, and certification” (*ibid.*, 3), they bring more people, more activities, and more kinds of learning, doing, and being within the embrace of formal, albeit micro-divided, certification. This suggests that interpenetration of schooling and society can expand even as the autonomy of higher education, and whatever symbolic power to define legitimate knowledge may have issued from its privileged position (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Stevens *et al.*, 2008), are diminishing. One thing is clear, though: An alternative system of credentialing with badges will require all the skill and energy that the “the legally and normatively autonomous, rights-bearing, rationally cognizant” social actor associated with the institutionalization of schooling (Stevens *et al.*, 2008, 134; see also Meyer, 1977) can muster.

A final question may be suggested. How can we analytically construct a “field” of higher education that comprises traditional public and private institutions, for-profit institutions, on-line providers, and, now, an expanding “ecosystem” of alternative credentialing? And, where would this field be situated in relation to the broader field of power (Bourdieu, 1996)?

References

Adams, Jonathan, and Margaret H. DeFleur. "The Acceptability of Online Degrees Earned as a Credential for Obtaining Employment." *Communication Education* 55 (2006): 32-45.

Baker, David P. "The Educational Transformation of Work: Toward a New Synthesis." *Journal of Education and Work* 22 (2009): 163-191.

Baker, David P. "Forward and Backward, Horizontal and Vertical: Transformation of Occupational Credentialing in the Schooled Society." *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility* 29 (2011a): 5-29.

Baker, David P. "The Future of the Schooled Society: The Transforming Culture of Education in Postindustrial Society." Pp. 11-34 in Maureen T. Hallinan (ed.), *Frontiers in Sociology of Education*. (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer, 2011b).

Beck, John, and Michael F. D. Young. "The Assault on the Professions and the Restructuring of Academic and Professional Identities: A Bernsteinian Analysis." *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 26 (2005): 183-197.

Bernstein, Basil. "On the Classification and Framing of Educational Knowledge." Pp. 47-69 in Michael F. D. Young (ed.), *Knowledge and Control: New Directions for the Sociology of Education*. London: Routledge, 1971.

Bernstein, Basil. *Pedagogy, Symbolic Control and Identity: Theory, Research and Critique* (revised edition). Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000.

Bills, David B. "Credentials, Signals, and Screens: Explaining the Relationship Between Schooling and Job Assignment." *Review of Educational Research* 73 (2003): 441-469.

Bissell, Ahrash. "Badges as Signals for Employers: A Critique." At "Ashrah on Open." <http://ahrashb.posterous.com/badges-as-signals-for-employers-a-critique>. Downloaded April 6, 2012.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *The State Nobility*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996 [1989].

Bourdieu, Pierre, Jean-Claude Passeron. *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*. London, England: SAGE Publications, 1977 [1970].

Carey, Kevin. "The Higher Education Monopoly is Crumbling as We Speak." *The New Republic*, March 13, 2012. Downloaded April 8, 2012 from <http://www.tnr.com/article/politics/101620/higher-education-accreditation-MIT-university>.

Collins, Randall. "Crises and Declines in Credential Systems." Pp. 191-215 in R. Collins, *Sociology Since Mid-Century: Essays in Theory Cumulation*. New York: Academic Press, 1981.

Collins, Randall. "Credential Inflation and the Future of Universities." *Italian Journal of Sociology of Education* 2 (2011): 228-251. Originally published in S. Brint (ed.), *The Future of the City of Intellect*.

Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002).

Connell, R.W., D. J. Ashenden, S. Kessler, G. W. Dowsett. *Making the Differences: Schools, Families and Social Division*. Sydney: George Allen & Unwin, 1982.

Crotty, James Marshall. "Why Get a Pricey Diploma When a Badge Will Do?" *Forbes*, January 26, 2012. Downloaded April 8, 2012 from <http://www.forbes.com/sites/jamesmarshallcrotty/2012/01/26/the-end-of-the-diploma-as-we-know-it/>.

Davies, Scott, Jal Mehta. "The Deepening Interpenetration of Education in Modern Life." Unpublished paper, May 5, 2011.

Glenn, David. "Online Learning Portals: Customizing Colleges Right Out of Higher Education?" *Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 29, 2011. Downloaded April 8, 2012 from <http://chronicle.com/article/Online-Learning-Portals-/127694/>.

Guillory, John. *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.

Hall, John R. "The Capital(s) of Culture: A Nonholisitc Approach to Status Situations, Class, Gender, and Ethnicity." Pp, 257-285 in Michele Lamont and Marcel Fournier, *Cultivating Differences: Symbolic Boundaries and the Making of Inequality*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.

Meyer, John W. "The Charter: Conditions of Diffuse Socialization in Schools." Stanford Center for Research and Development in Teaching, Stanford University. Available at ERIC. ED049969.

Meyer, John W. "The Effects of Education as an Institution." *American Journal of Sociology* 83 (1977): 55-77.

Meyer, John W., Francisco O. Ramirez, David John Frank, Evan Schofer. "Higher Education as an Institution." Unpublished paper, December 31, 2005.

Mozilla. Open Badges - FAQ. Downloaded April 8, 2012 from <http://openbadges.org/en-US/faq.html>.

O'Shaughnessy, Lynn. "Digital Badges Could Significantly Impact Higher Education." *U.S. News & World Report*, October 4, 2011. Downloaded April 8, 2012 from http://www.usnews.com/education/blogs/the-college-solution/2011/10/04/digital-badges-could-significantly-impact-higher-education_print.html.

Parry, Marc. "MIT Will Offer Certificates to Outside Students in Online Courses." *Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 1, 2012. Downloaded April 8, 2012 from <http://chronicle.com/article/MIT-Will-Offer-Certificates-to/130173/>.

Stevens, Mitchell L., Elizabeth A. Armstrong, and Richard Arum. "Sieve, Incubator, Temple, Hub: Empirical and Theoretical Advances in the Sociology of Higher Education." *Annual Review of Sociology* 34 (2008): 127-151.

Watters, Audrey. "How Will Mozilla's Open Badges Project Affect Higher Ed?" *Inside Higher*

Education, November 15, 2011. Downloaded April 8, 2012 from <http://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/hack-higher-education/how-will-mozillas-open-badges-project-affect-higher-ed>.

Young, Jeffrey R. (a) “Merit Badges for the Job Market.” *The Wall Street Journal*, January 21-22, 2012. Downloaded April 9, 2012 from <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970204301404577170912221516638.html?KEYWORDS=merit+badges>.

Young, Jeffrey R. (b) “‘Badges’ Earned Online Pose Challenge to Traditional College Diplomas.” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 8, 2012. Downloaded April 8, 2012 from <http://chronicle.com/article/Badges-Earned-Online-Pose/130241/>.

Young, Michael. F. D. *The Curriculum of the Future: From the ‘New Sociology of Education to a Critical Theory of Learning*. London, England: Falmer Press, 1998.