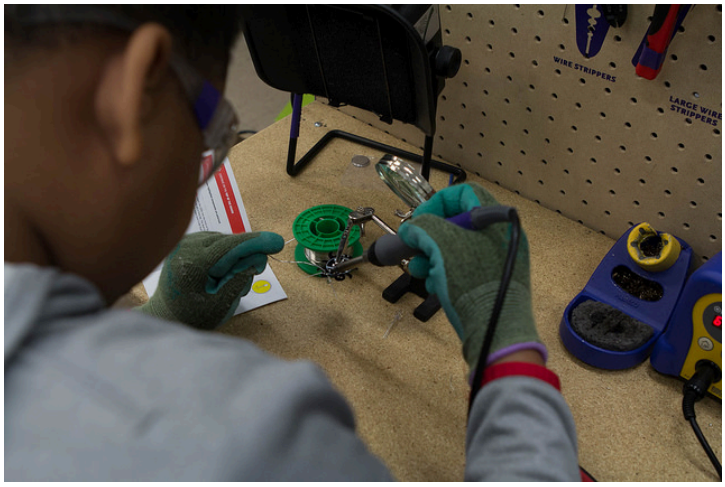
Maryland Out of School Time Network (MOST)*Badging in Afterschool Programs for Workforce Development*



A student at the Digital Harbor Foundation completes a soldering project

Tech Badges for Employment

During the 2015-2016 school year, the Maryland Out of School Time (MOST) Network collaborated with the Digital Harbor Foundation (DHF) and the Baltimore City Mayor's Office of Employment Development (MOED) to develop a citywide digital badges pilot program. The goal of the project was to introduce a set of badges focused on learning experiences in technology, obtainable by high school-aged students through their afterschool and community programs, and relevant to the local technology industry in Baltimore. The project would then connect badge-earners to MOED's YouthWorks summer jobs initiative whereupon technology companies seeking interns could recruit based on skills represented in the badges.

Images of the four technology badges developed for the pilot

To complement the technology badges, three 21st century skills badges which students could

earn using the same projects were developed aligned to the Mozilla 21st Century & Web Literacy skills. Students could earn the 21st Century skills badges alongside the technology skills badges using the same projects to illustrate creativity, problem solving and communication skills.

All of the badges hosted on the Digital Harbor badges site are open to anyone, anywhere of all ages to earn.

Outcomes and Successes

The MOST Network began the pilot by attending MOED's YouthWorks information sessions during the winter of 2016 to engage internship-seeking students, and provide more information around earning digital badges for STEM projects. In total, MOST collected a group of 90 Baltimore City high school students that had expressed interest, and remained in contact with them throughout the placement and project process. During the spring of 2016, DHF hosted two Digital Olympics workshops where potential badge-earners and YouthWorks candidates could complete projects in any of the four tech badges.

A local community development corporation - the Southwest Partnership - who reached out to DHF to connect their students to the opportunity. The Southwest Partnership hosted over a dozen YouthWorkers over the summer to work alongside community organizers, and were interested in the WordPress and Graphic Design badges. One YouthWorker with the Partnership in particular, Dorian, completed the Wordpress badge by submitting the project at this link. His experience inspired the Southwest Partnership of Baltimore to start to design their own badges and DHF helped provide some guidance and platform suggestions.

You can see Dorian's project submission here: http://hollinsroundhouse.wordpress.com

Challenges & Lessons Learned

While we unveiled badges and connected badge-earners to summer jobs, the real focus of this project and our partnership with the Mozilla Foundation was to build a Digital Badging Ecosystem. This has proved inherently challenging as we are arriving at a "chicken and egg" scenario: youth want to earn badges to display skills, and employers want to hire interns that already have relevant knowledge and talents, but both stakeholders need early adopters to generate momentum. One way we have worked to overcome this challenge is via DHF's efforts to constantly solicit feedback from youth in their programs, and in turn iterate their badging project and awards system. For instance, DHF is working on providing an incentive for badge projects by incorporating badge submission in their programming, and allowing students to submit badge requirements ad-hoc as opposed to all at the end of a project.

Next Steps

DHF has begun to implement the badge submission process as part of their courses. All of DHF's youth recently participated in a WebSLAM competition, have met the badge requirements, and are in the process of submitting their applications.

Earned badges at DHF can serve as interim benchmarks on the way to the college credit. Recently, DHF's afterschool programs were accredited by the Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC) for three credits in Digital Fabrication. In parallel of this effort, youth taking this course at DHF are also earning related badges in the three content areas (3D Printing, CNC Milling, Laser Cutting) for the college course. Badges are being considered for a similar partnership between Code in the Schools and University of Baltimore for a Computer Science college credit course for high school students.

With participation from CCBC and University of Baltimore, pilot partners are optimistic that they will able to recruit more employers and YouthWorks sponsors to recognize badge-earners as interns or employees. MOST will continue to promote the development of a digital badging ecosystem throughout the state, and locally, will continue to work with MOED to connect STEM students to badges and intentional summer experiences.