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Challenge Accepted! Going Gameful to Develop Soft Skills

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Introduction

Today's workplace requires creative, flexible, and adaptable project leaders and problem solvers who can interact with the diverse world around them in positive ways. At the same time, they must also balance professional demands with lifelong learning and a personal life. College students are trying to prepare for jobs that don't even exist yet, requiring skills that can transfer across positions and career paths. In response to this need, in 2016 the University of Michigan-Dearborn created the Talent Gateway, an innovative program that promotes a holistic approach to career-readiness through gameful learning.

The creators of this program wanted something that would 1) help students build habits of creativity and reinvention; 2) be student-driven, inclusive, voluntary, scalable, and sustainable; and 3) encourage students to reflect on their personal and professional experiences as well as their curricular and co-curricular activities. Knowing that UM-Dearborn students have busy, demanding lives outside of class, the creators also wanted a program that would leverage what

students were already doing, not add extra work that wouldn't appeal to them.

Created in Canvas, the University's learning management system, the Talent Gateway is easily accessible to all students, whenever it is convenient for them. Participation is voluntary, so students opt in, and by leveraging tools that already exist on campus, it is scalable and sustainable. This online program is open to all students, with participants who range from first-year to graduate students.

When students join the Talent Gateway, they become part of a community that connects them to campus resources and helps them identify and engage with mentors as well as develop habits of self-reflection and critical thinking. Reflection is the cornerstone of the Talent Gateway, and as students earn points for submitting "challenges" that prompt them to explore their academic, personal and professional experiences and goals, they learn to recognize and leverage connections among all of their learning and living experiences. By developing habits of self-reflection, initiative and creativity, those who participate in the Talent Gateway are not only

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ready for their first professional position but are more prepared to reinvent themselves throughout their careers.

Building Skills in the Talent Gateway

As the program was in the final stages of development, one of the creators learned of a new tool developed by University of Michigan-Ann Arbor called Gradecraft. This was a game changer for the program, and today, the foundations of the Talent Gateway are the challenges in Gradecraft and a “gameful learning” approach. Gradecraft was originally created for traditional classes to increase student autonomy, engagement, and intrinsic motivation. At its core are four foundational concepts (Aguilar et al., 2015; GradeCraft, n.d.): 1) *Earn up*; 2) *Autonomy of choice*; 3) *Freedom to fail*; and 4) *Tangible progress*. The Talent Gateway uses Gradecraft to create “challenges” – small tasks with associated reflection questions. Each challenge prompts students to reflect on how that task impacts their academic, personal, and professional success as well as how the experience or skill can be applied in life after college. Challenges are reviewed and awarded by upperclassmen and graduate student workers called Talent Ambassadors. The Ambassadors themselves gain valuable skills including sharing constructive feedback, communication skills, time management and more.

Many of these challenges are tagged with the [National Association of Colleges and Employers](#) (NACE) competencies (as well as the additional competencies of Creativity and Civic Engagement). As students complete challenges, they are also developing and learning to articulate these competencies.

Upon completion of 10 challenges in a specific category, students “unlock” the associated Competency Capstone. In the capstone, they express their skills in the competency as they would in a cover letter or résumé, and most importantly, they answer interview questions associated with that skill (some of which are submitted by employer partners). If students are awarded points for the capstone, they also receive a digital badge.

The principles of gameful learning can be found throughout the Talent Gateway – students *all start at zero and choose their own path*. That includes the ability to choose a competency – for example, leadership – and work on challenges that specifically relate to that skill. They also have the *freedom to fail*; if they do not answer all of the reflection questions in a challenge, their submission is returned with feedback from the Talent Ambassador that encourages them to think critically, revise, and resubmit. They can choose to resubmit or move on, with no penalty or consequence. Students can see their progress on their dashboard, and in addition to digital badges for competencies, students can *earn badges and awards* for ascending levels of (M)Talent, culminating in the (M)Talent distinction.

Earning the (M)Talent Distinction

One of the strengths of this program is that students can participate during their entire UM-Dearborn journey, working towards earning the (M)Talent distinction. If their schedules get busy or they lose interest, they can stop submitting challenges and come back at a later time. When a student earns 50,000 points, they are eligible to present at an (M)Talent Showcase. These events

are opportunities for students to connect and network with employers, and for employers to experience firsthand the quality and caliber of these students.

Through a short Ted Talk-style presentation, the candidates share their stories of growth and development, and demonstrate the skills they have gained that make them ready for the workforce. Even then they are not finished; after the event, they must have a debrief with staff to discuss what went well, what they would do differently, and what they have learned from the Talent Gateway experience as whole. The (M)Talent distinction is then awarded on the students' official transcript, and these students are recognized at graduation. Currently almost 1000 students (10% of the student population) participate in the Talent Gateway, and 500 participants have graduated. Eighty-one students have earned the (M)Talent distinction, and we anticipate 25-30 more in December 2020.

Why is This Important?

As mentioned, the Talent Gateway is a community. Since UM-Dearborn is primarily a commuter campus, this program provides a connection to a community and campus life that is sometimes hard for commuters to develop – and is even more important during the 2020 pandemic. As one student said, “I love Talent Gateway because of the sense of community it gives you. As a non-traditional student, the Gateway is the first thing that made me feel like a student here, and when I started the Gateway, I had this common experience with other students.”

There are certainly some challenges in the Gateway that are lighter in tone,

like “Discover Your Inner Superhero” or “Me in 3 Short Words,” which adds an element of fun. But the depth of student reflection is clear: even through challenges that are “easy”, students display a new understanding and comprehension of how their academic, career, and personal goals (and growth) intersect to make them more insightful about who they are and how their skills make them more marketable as employees. Being “challenged” to try new tasks and experiences encourages them to step outside of their comfort zones in ways they would not have before, bringing new confidence to then step out – and up – even more.

Employers seek graduates with not only the academic knowledge and hard skills required of the position, but soft skills as well (Stewart et al., 2016). Graduates with strong interpersonal skills contribute positively to the organization. These employees will be adaptable and ready to pivot to meet the changing needs of today's workplace. By reflecting on their experiences in the Talent Gateway, students are better able to articulate and demonstrate their soft skills, and this can help them be successful no matter where they go next in life. One recent graduate shared:

At my pharmacy school interview, the Dean gave a presentation to the group of candidates, stating that employers are looking for graduate students who have strong soft skills. When she addressed the applicants asking if anyone knew what soft skills were, I was the only one who nodded and was able to explain what they are. Although this may be a simple thing, answering this question helped me stand out to the Dean on interview day and made me more confident to answer other

questions. I wouldn't have been able to do this without my involvement in the Talent Gateway. ■

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