

Using Cryptocurrency to Increase Peer Mentoring Engagement

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STEAM Academy is a pilot program to develop a 'virtual peer mentoring' aimed at high school students. The purpose is to assist students during their senior year in high school to think about and get prepared for college. Currently we are investigating methods, strategies, and available technological tools to build relationships with high school student mentees. Peer mentors and mentees at this time experiment with the use of a variety of social media, apps, programs, and chats.

An avenue of investigation is the use of "cryptocurrency" as a gamifying tool to increase engagement. "Cryptocurrency" does not require value to be associated with it. Instead, it can be formatted as a "token" with no cash value. We envision exchanging tokens for "rewards", such as content, basic school related supplies/items, college prep topic, or achievements. These rewards can include things like having access to special campus announcements, campus events, student discounts, access to school club activities, etc. Exchanging tokens for "rewards" is not unlike redeeming frequent flyer miles for travel, redeeming tickets from redemption games for items, or, within a video game, completing a mission/task to unlock 'achievements.' The main way to acquire crypto-coins (tokens) is for users to accomplish some kind of task. To encourage participation of mentor-mentee groups, if they accomplish some kind of task/mission together, they can earn a set value of tokens. The kind of tasks/missions they need to accomplish and how they would accomplish it (whether in the physical or virtual world) remains to be determined.

There are secondary ways to acquire tokens. One is to 'mine' their own currency. If a user mines their own tokens, it can be done at their own pace, and their accrual rate would be at a lower rate than if they were to acquire them through group activities with a mentor. Another way to get tokens could be to watch video or listen to audio content. Content could include general campus announcements, advertising for special events, news about various campus services, introductions to various campus resources (library, dining, health, academic, advising, student services, etc.), or even advertising/news about different campus clubs, sports, and organizations. These secondary ways are a great for users to gain tokens at their own pace, especially for those that may not be fully participating in their peer mentor program.

A peer mentoring program using this type of engagement as a tool has the benefit to attract, and gain commitment of, prospective students to the university. As the prospective student becomes more involved with this type of virtual peer mentoring and becomes familiar with campus offerings and benefit from the support, the assertion is that they will be more apt to choose to attend the university. On the contrary, if a prospective student, despite their participation, decides to attend university elsewhere, the student still benefits from the experience. In this case, the assertion is that in general, the questions that all students have when attending a new university are universal.