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2013 CAEL Forum & News

Competency-Based Education

COMPETENCIES
QUALITY
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PERSONALIZED
MODULAR COURSES
STUDENT-CENTERED
PERFORMANCE
LEARNING
PLA
ASSESSMENT
DEMONSTRATION
DEGREE COMPLETION
OPEN EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES

FROM THE EDITORS

Dear Readers,

In 2012, CAEL published *Competency-Based Degree Programs in the U.S.* which described the history of competency-based programs and showcased several models, both long-running and new. Since the release of that publication, there has been what CAEL President Pamela Tate has called a "tidal wave" of activity, including white papers, summits, new program development, and real movement in terms of public policies.

We are using this print issue of the CAEL *Forum and News* to bring you some of these developments. In the first section, **Setting the Stage**, we share an edited version of a speech by John Cavanaugh (President and CEO of the Consortium of Universities of the DC Metropolitan Area and former chancellor of the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education) that was delivered at a national summit on assessing outcomes and competencies, and we provide a full summary of the summit itself. These articles provide a good overview of how some leaders in the higher education community are beginning to think about competency-based assessment and degree programs, the related issues and challenges, and what is needed to move forward.

In the second section, **Approaches to Competency-Based Education and Assessment,** you will find articles on three brand-new competency-based programs: Northern Arizona University's Personalized Learning, Southern New Hampshire University's College for America, and University of Maryland University College's program in development.

Finally, the section **Accreditation and Federal Policy** contains an interview with Ralph Wolff of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges on an accreditor's perspective of the changes in higher education, and we provide an excerpt on federal financial aid solutions for competency-based approaches from *Cracking the Credit Hour* by Amy Laitinen of the New America Foundation.

We hope you enjoy this issue of the CAEL *Forum and News* and its discussions of this new landscape in higher education today. We look forward to bringing you more on this topic in the near future.

The Forum and News Editorial Board
Diana Bamford-Rees
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2013 CAEL *Forum & News* Competency-Based Education

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SETTING THE STAGE

The Coming Personalization of Postsecondary Education Competencies

By John Cavanaugh, Consortium of Universities of the Washington Metropolitan Area; formerly of the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (PASSHE)

Following is an excerpt from the keynote speech delivered to attendees of a national summit on Assessing Outcomes & Competencies on February 12, 2013 in Washington, D.C. The event was hosted by CAEL in cooperation with The Center for Educational Measurement at Excelsior College.

Although much progress has been made in helping returning adult students obtain college credentials, too many are still turned away because they don't fit the classic mold. We need a better solution. I offer one option here.

Let's Start at the Very Beginning

Giving prior learning credit where it is due has become a core topic in higher education today. Prior learning assessment (PLA) and massively open online courses (MOOCs) are claimed to be the killer apps that will force postsecondary education to restructure because, to paraphrase on old Dire Straits tune, now you get your knowledge for nothing and your learning for free. Certainly, the column inches (or their virtual corollary) devoted to these topics would lead you to believe that. It's the new conventional wisdom, anyway. But it's wrong.

The concept and practice of massively open courses (or, more generically, the learning opportunities of such courses) have existed since humans started learning and teaching. What makes a massively open learning opportunity? Many people have to be able to access the information being presented at the same time in groups or as individuals in parallel. For free. In the past, teachers wandered around, giving talks or lessons to very large groups of listeners in an amphitheater or on a hillside. Authentic assessment occurred in the form of active demonstration of what was learned.

More recently, massively open courses have been made available through *Sunrise Semester*,[1] then PBS (remember Carl Sagan teaching us about the cosmos, in a series seen by over 500 million people in more than 60 countries?), the early days of the History Channel and Discovery Channel, and countless collections of lectures on YouTube and iTunes University. Learning assessment, through the College Level Examination Program (CLEP) and other means, has also been around a long time.

My point is that only the online delivery part is new, and the improved tools that this delivery system brings. So, we know how to provide free content and how to evaluate the learning. It's time we apply that experience to postsecondary education.

> **We know how to provide free content and how to evaluate the learning. It's time we apply that experience to postsecondary education.**

PLA and MOOCs in Contemporary Postsecondary Education

To make this happen, we should start with the many ways in which learning opportunities are available, use our experience in assessing learning that people accrue from any of these opportunities, and create individualized learning plans or pathways that get students to their credential goals quicker and with more knowledge/learning to show for it. This, in turn, can increase completion rates and help us achieve the needed attainment goals. Here are some necessary steps:

Step 1: Define Postsecondary Credentials in Terms of Specific Learning Outcomes or Competencies That are Assessed

Many professions already define credentials on the basis of specific, assessed learning outcomes that the profession agrees are necessary and sufficient to merit the credential. The trick will be to go beyond these specific disciplines and to include general education. Despite lists of learning/skills/competencies that students are to acquire during their studies, few institutions actually articulate how those skills/competencies map onto learning (e.g., mapping learning/skills/competencies onto specific courses), and even fewer provide evidence of their authentic assessment. Most institutions track general education by counting credits across distribution requirements, which documents little in relation to actual demonstration of learning or of competencies acquired.

Moving from credit-based to learning outcomes-based definitions of credentials is more than just a nominal definitional change. Credentials based on credits provide no way to know what the credential holder knows. They reflect only that the credential holder has collected the minimum number of credits and taken the minimum number of courses necessary. That is not good enough.

Articulating specific learning outcomes also forces us to think through what different letter grades mean (or don't mean) in a course. If the acquisition of certain minimum levels of learning must occur for the student to be successful in the next course, and if a "C" does not reflect that, but if a "C" translates into a passing grade, then what does passing the course mean if the student has not learned the minimum necessary? Similarly, if an "A" reflects learning well beyond the minimum, and may reflect significant levels of learning in the next course, then why would a student be required to re-learn the material rather than being allowed to start from where they are in their learning?

Step 2: Meet the Student at the Edge of Their Learning.

Each student comes to us at a slightly different place on the learning continuum. But we have not realized this across disciplines other than mathematics and English language arts. Now we need to expand that approach to the other areas of "prior" learning that the student brings, such as history, critical thinking, information technology literacy, and social science, among others. Learning in these areas can come from just about anywhere. It is the assessment of whether or not the learning the student demonstrates reflects the learning necessary for the academic credential being sought that matters most. However, such assessments will need to be monitored for quality assurance, which is, perhaps, most efficiently and effectively done through accreditation (or equivalent; see Cavanaugh, 2011a, b). As long as one can demonstrate the appropriate content mastery, it should not matter whether the learning came from taking a MOOC, reading extensively, or watching Ken Burns' latest series.

Redefining credentials to competencies will make it possible to build upon the accumulated learning that students may already have when they arrive at our institutions to pursue a specific credential. It is much more straightforward because we can then specify the necessary prior learning for each step, from first term through various transfer-in points along the way, to final achievement of the credential.

> **As long as one can demonstrate the appropriate content mastery, it should not matter whether the learning came from taking a MOOC, reading extensively, or watching Ken Burns' latest series.**

Step 3: Designing Personalized Learning Pathways to Credentials

The next step is to do a learning gap analysis between the learning students bring with them and the learning needed for the credential. When carefully executed, this learning gap analysis could provide the basis for significantly better, more focused academic and career advising.

Good learning gap analysis is essential for identifying the best way(s) for students to complete a postsecondary credential, and to avoid needless retaking of courses. Accurate learning gap analysis could also eliminate the arguments over credit transfer based on subjective reading of course syllabi by focusing exclusively on what the student does or does not know. Showing students where they currently are on the pathway to the credential they want to earn for a future occupation or career will enable them to decide, given where they are, whether they want to continue on that pathway or choose a

Personalized learning plans for postsecondary credentials could also significantly decrease the time to credential completion.

different one that may be a better match between their current learning status and future requirements.

Now, imagine this world. We would provide students, especially when they enter our institutions, with a personalized pathway to their credential, and describe in detail the knowledge they will need to acquire, roughly in the sequence it needs to happen, in order to get there. Imagine, further, that students would also be able to ascertain what learning/knowledge would best complement their chosen path, as well as the knowledge that might enable them to expand the range of opportunities available to them. *That* would be revolutionary.

Personalized learning plans for postsecondary credentials could also significantly decrease the time to credential completion in two ways. First, clearly documenting where the student is along the pathway to the credential at the time of entry would reduce the likelihood that the student will be required to unnecessarily repeat courses. Second, the ability to create clear, individualized learning plans means that institutions would need to ensure that the necessary learning opportunities are available when the student needs them. Situations in which needed courses are not offered in a given term would be unacceptable. That would likely result in more focused curricula that would reduce students' time to credential.

Other Steps Needed for and Some Consequences of Competency-Based Credentials, Assessment, and Individualized Learning Plans

Nearly everything we currently do at postsecondary institutions is based on the credit hour system in one way or another. Not using the credit as the basis for our teaching, workload, student progress, and business models has very significant implications for the way we operate. Adopting learning outcomes as the basis would require us to do the following:

- Define courses on the basis of the amount of student learning that is expected to occur. This would connect us to the European Bologna Process, in which a credit is grounded in the amount of student work and learning that is expected.
- Understand that "courses" will have no clear endpoint, as learning communities that were formed during the course continue.
- Redefine the faculty role to disaggregate the teaching–learning enterprise into its constituent components that truly need faculty expertise (similar to what has occurred in health care regarding nurses and physicians).
- Include student learning outcomes as one measure of faculty performance in annual evaluations and for tenure and promotion.
- Restructure the financial models, such as using differential tuition rates depending on the level and amount of learning (an analog of the current approach of charging per credit), charging a flat amount over a specific period of time (the approach used by Western Governors University), or some other, blended approach. Tuition and fees could also be set as a function of the type of credential the student is seeking. Institutional and unit funding could be based on course or credential completion, analyses of the cost of providing student learning opportunities, or other alternative.
- Redefine the basis for accreditation from the institution level only to include non-college/university content providers (Cavanaugh, 2011a, b). The reason is that the boundary condition for delivering and certifying competency-based credentials, the certification of knowledge for the credential, may not be limited to traditional institutions. In

> that case, the quality assurance process that we have ascribed to accreditation would need to include these possibilities. The role of accreditation would shift to quality assurance of the learning assessment process.

Other professions and economic sectors have figured this out. We can, too.

Final Thoughts

In the near term, making these changes will be easier for institutions that have greater flexibility to change. I am heartened by the many faculty and administrators who are creating the innovative approaches to make the changes real, and to embed them in the culture of their respective institutions.

Those institutions that are able to complete the steps I have laid out will be able to provide students with superior advising and clearer pathways to achieving the academic credentials that students seek. And they will likely be able to do that in a more cost-effective manner than their competitors. The outcome is likely to be enrollment shifts away from traditional institutions that fail to adapt to the changing demographics and needs of students to those that do adapt.

I also believe it is likely that we will see increased collaboration across organizations, whether across traditional institutions that redefine their niches or to public–private partnerships with a collaboration among entities that are specialists in each arena.

We know the elements of most of what we need to do. Now let's work together and help each other create the ones we don't.

Endnotes

1 *Sunrise Semester* was an American television series that aired on CBS from 1957 to 1982. It was produced in conjunction with New York University.

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Assessing Outcomes & Competencies: A National Summit for Innovators

Summary of an event hosted by CAEL in cooperation with The Center for Educational Measurement at Excelsior College

Washington, DC, February 12-13, 2013

Introduction and Background

In February 2013, the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) and The Center for Educational Measurement at Excelsior College hosted a national summit on "Assessing Outcomes & Competencies." The overall purpose of the event was for national experts to discuss the transformation that is rapidly taking place in higher education as increasing numbers of adult learners are pursuing college-level learning from a variety of sources, as new providers of learning content and assessment are emerging, and as states' higher education systems face shrinking budgets. (See appendix for list of attendees.)

CAEL President and CEO Pamela Tate, in introducing the event, said that even though many attending this summit have been doing assessment of learning and competencies for decades, it has taken until now for those in the mainstream to take note of this and recognize assessment of competencies as not only an important feature of high quality postsecondary education but also a central strategy in adult degree completion. In June 2012, CAEL published *Competency-Based Degree Programs in the U.S.: Postsecondary Credentials for Measurable Student Learning and Performance,* which showcased several models for offering degrees based on student competencies rather than accumulated credit hours,[1] and less than one year later, Tate described what she called a "tidal wave" of interest in competency-based education and assessments.

The objectives of the summit included:

- Gaining a deeper understanding of the proven tools and processes that already exist to validate learning and that meet higher education's expectations for rigor, integrity, and security; also, leveraging these existing tools and assessments so that there is no duplication of effort.
- Recognizing the growing need for colleges, accreditors, and regulators to shift from measuring inputs, such as seat time and the credentials of faculty, to measuring learning outcomes.
- Reaching greater clarity about the important role of competency-based assessment methods in accelerating progress toward degrees.
- Identifying strategies for raising awareness across government, higher education, and the private sector so that these competency-based approaches can be supported.
- Determining whether there is interest in joining together to educate federal and state regulators and policymakers about post-traditional learners, the important role of assessment in higher education, and policy changes that are needed to help learners complete college or gain a postsecondary credential.

Setting the Stage

Three guest speakers provided additional context on the changes in higher education: John Cavanaugh, Chancellor of the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (PASSHE); Margaret Spellings, Senior Advisor, U.S. Chamber of Commerce and former U.S. Secretary of Education, 2005-2009; and John Bailey, Executive Director, Digital Learning Now, Senior Advisor, Whiteboard Advisors.

John Cavanaugh began his remarks with the recognition that learning has long been available for free—long before MOOCs emerged in the last year—and that people have always taken advantage of free learning opportunities. He also noted that prior learning assessment (PLA) is not new. What is new is the delivery format of both the learning and the assessment. With the many ways in which learning opportunities are available, we can use our experience in assessing learning and create individualized learning plans or pathways that get students to their credential goals more quickly. This, in turn, can ultimately increase completion rates and help us achieve degree attainment goals. In other words, PLA is the key to attainment.

Cavanaugh outlined several steps to move forward on competency-based education and assessment:

- Step 1: Define postsecondary credentials in terms of specific learning outcomes or competencies that are assessed. This will require that we be specific about skills/competencies for both credentials and general education.
- Step 2: Meet students "at the edge of their learning." This includes rethinking college readiness and remediation, and expanding learning assessment to all areas of study.
- Step 3: Design personalized learning pathways to credentials. This will require conducting learning gap analyses to show students where they are on the pathway.

Cavanaugh added that these changes have other implications. For example:

- Courses will have no clear "ending point;" they will no longer be based on time or the credit hour.
- Faculty work will be disaggregated; PhD programs will need to help train professors to understand the different roles of delivering content and assessing content.
- There will be different financial models; tuition and fees will be charged in new ways.
- We will need to redefine accreditation so that the basis for accreditation includes content providers. For example, Pearson currently offers credentials in Great Britain. The role of accreditation might need to shift to include quality assurance of the learning assessment process.

Cavanaugh said that other professions and economic sectors have figured out new workloads and financial models; higher education can, too. He noted that many faculty are already working towards these goals and that institutions that adapt will survive. This may require greater collaboration and "niche focus."[2]

Margaret Spellings provided additional context for the changes we are seeing today in higher education. She said that the U.S. has long been seen as having the best system of higher education in the world, and yet that appears to be changing as we see the U.S. slipping in global rankings on educational attainment. She pondered whether our current higher education system is up to the task of advancing to meet the shifting needs of our student population since the

What is PLA?

Prior learning is a term educators use to describe learning that a person acquires outside a traditional academic environment. This learning may have been acquired through work experience, employer training programs, independent study, non-credit courses, volunteer or community service, travel, or non-college courses or seminars.

Prior learning assessment (PLA) is the process by which an individual's experiential learning is assessed and evaluated for purposes of granting college credit, certification, or advanced standing toward further education or training. There are four generally accepted approaches to PLA and, when properly conducted, all ensure academic quality: (1) national standardized exams in specified disciplines, e.g., Advanced Placement (AP) exams, College Level Examination Program (CLEP) tests, Excelsior College exams, DSST (DANTES Subject Standardized Tests); (2) college faculty-developed challenge exams for local courses; (3) evaluated non-college programs, e.g., National College Credit Recommendation Service (NCCRS) or American Council on Education (ACE) evaluations of corporate training and military training; and (4) individualized assessments, particularly portfolio-based assessments, such as those conducted by CAEL's LearningCounts.org and by some individual colleges.

Businesses are starting not to care about "degrees" at all. They care about what their workers know and can do.

industry does not have a history of embracing change.

And yet Spellings observed that there are signs that we are moving towards greater change. There is a lot of criticism of for-profit education providers, but there is actually much that the rest of higher education can learn from them and is, in fact, learning from them. For-profit institutions have the capital needed to test new models and new innovations that can ultimately benefit all institutions. The rest of higher education should be taking advantage of their ability to test out new ideas.

Spellings noted that much of what President Obama said in his 2013 State of the Union speech is going in the right direction and is what we need. He stressed accountability in education through the College Scorecard, so that we can hold colleges accountable in terms of affordability and value. But this, said Spellings, is only one step in what could be possible. We all saw in the election how the analysis of "big data" could turn a campaign on its head. We need to find ways to do that for education as well. Every sector of our economy is using technology in new and innovative ways, and so should postsecondary education. We need more creative thinking about delivering college instruction in cost-effective and relevant ways.

The way that higher education defines credentials is one area in which we are also likely to see big changes. Spellings remarked that businesses are starting not to care about "degrees" at all. They care about what their workers know and can do. Once employers figure out what skills and competencies they want and need, that is all they will ask for. They will demand someone with those very specific credentials.

John Bailey spoke to the summit about public policy in higher education and the key trends that are of most interest to policy leaders in Washington, D.C., and in states.

A key issue is, of course, the cost and affordability of a college education. With incomes stagnant and college tuition costs ever increasing, policy leaders are paying attention to affordability. However, rather than addressing affordability through increased financial aid, we are likely to see greater attention to better transparency in college costs and student outcomes. And when financial aid is part of the solution, we are likely to see institutional performance measures linked to student assistance.

Given the concerns about affordability, as well as about the value of a college degree, it is no surprise that policy leaders are also paying attention to the rise of MOOCs (massive open online courses) and other low- or no-cost online education. Bailey noted that Republican governors in Wisconsin, Texas, and Indiana have been championing—and also launching—competency-based education programs in which students can have their learning assessed so that it can count towards a degree, no matter where or how that learning was acquired. There is also interest in policy circles as to whether competency-based approaches can help address the issue of affordability.

Competency assessment is not only a focus in higher education, but also in K-12, with 45 states adopting the Common Core State Standards. These standards describe what students are expected to learn. In the near future, student assessments of that learning will be part of the model. Bailey noted that the higher education community will be called upon to help validate the "college readiness" of the standards and the assessments.

Themes

Over a day and a half, the attendees heard from three panels of experts. One was a panel of providers, including representatives from Coursera, Open Courseware Consortium, StraighterLine, and the Saylor Foundation. One was a panel of assessors, with representatives from the American Council on Education (ACE), CAEL, National College Credit Recommendation Services (NCCRS), College Board, and Educational Testing Service (ETS). The third was a panel of representatives of institutions: University of Maryland University College, SUNY Empire State College, Charter Oak State College, and Excelsior College. (See sidebar for names of panelists, moderators, and other presenters.)

The panel presentations, along with the discussion with the attendees, touched on a number of themes:

- Mass Customization and the Role of Advising
- Dependence on the Quality of the Assessment
- The Role of MOOCs and Other Low - or No-Cost Educational Options
- The Role of Employers
- Accreditation Issues

Mass Customization and the Role of Advising

Several institutions described the ways in which their degree programs have been designed around competency frameworks and how they use competency-based assessments and prior learning assessments. For example, University of Maryland University College has recently developed two professional degree programs with an "outcomes-based curriculum," mapping each course's outcomes to broader program level outcomes. Program advisors work in a deliberate way with students to identify the potential for credit through PLA.

The larger discussion among the institutional panelists centered on the idea that these programs allow for "mass customization" of postsecondary education. For some institutions, such as Empire State College and Charter Oak State College, "mass customization" means that students can approach the degree programs entrepreneurially, designing their own degrees and taking advantage of different methods of instruction and content delivery. For other institutions, such as Excelsior College and UMUC, "mass customization" means that the program meets students where they are, offering various assessments to determine where the student is in his or her progress towards a degree. "Meeting students where they are" suggests that some students may be further along than others in what they have already mastered; when programs recognize that mastery, the students can often complete their degrees faster. (See sidebar for research highlights on the link between PLA and better academic outcomes.)

Panel of Providers

Moderator: Paul Fain, Inside Higher Ed

Panelists:
- Devon Ritter, The Saylor Foundation
- Mary Lou Forward, Open Courseware Consortium
- Burck Smith, StraighterLine
- Andrew Ng, Coursera

Panel of Assessors

Moderator: Stacey Clawson, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation

Panelists:
- Patricia Book, American Council on Education (ACE)
- Chari Leader Kelley, LearningCounts.org, CAEL
- Tina Grant, National College Credit Recommendation Service (NCCRS)
- Constance Tsai, College Board
- Paul Rybinski, ETS

Panel of Institutional Users and Assessors

Moderator: George Pruitt, Thomas A. Edison State College

Panelists:
- Marie Cini, University of Maryland University College
- Deborah Amory, SUNY Empire State College
- Ed Klonoski, Charter Oak State College
- Mary Beth Hanner, Excelsior College

State of the Art Simulation DEMO

- Bryan Kanter, Tata Interactive Systems

With so many different permutations possible—especially for content delivery and assessments—the common need of all of these programs is strong advising services to help students map out their life and career goals, to help students develop a plan to complete the degree, and to be more deliberate in helping students identify whether they already have learning that could be assessed for credit.

Dependence on the Quality of the Assessment

The importance of the assessments themselves could not be understated. One institutional panelist noted that in a program where students must demonstrate learning in order to progress, "You have to trust the assessments." This is particularly true in programs where students are encouraged to seek learning opportunities from a variety of sources, not exclusive to the course offerings of the home institution. When the instruction is not something that the student's institution is providing directly, the method of assessing learning must be rigorous and valid.

Role of MOOCs and Other Low- or No-Cost Educational Options

The recent phenomenon of the MOOC, along with other low- or no-cost online courses, was a frequent topic of discussions throughout the summit. The provider panel discussed how student assessments and evaluation of the courses are providing some options that allow students to apply what they have learned to their degrees. For example, Coursera is offering its Signature Track Courses for a small fee; these courses have been evaluated for credit by ACE and require student learning assessments using digital webcam proctoring. StraighterLine courses, also offered at a very low cost, have been similarly evaluated, and a number of institutions now accept these credit recommendations. Individual institutions (e.g., UMUC) are also developing their own assessments of some MOOCs.

While these provide low-cost options for college credit for students, institutions are also realizing some benefits. First, MOOCs, in particular, allow for the "flipped classroom" model, in which students view lectures outside of class, and the face-to-face interaction with faculty is used for in-depth discussion, questions, or problem solving. Second, the providers argued that low-cost online courses offer students who have been away from school for a long time a low-cost, low-risk way to prove to themselves and to institutions that they can handle college-level instruction. Third, these low-cost, for-credit courses can help expand the capacity of institutions. The University of California-Irvine, for example, is using two of the Coursera courses evaluated by ACE (Algebra and Pre-Calculus) to meet student demand for specific course content. (At the time of the summit, the California legislature was considering a bill requiring its public colleges to address overcrowding and waiting lists for courses by accepting credits from private sector online courses.)

Yet one question is difficult to ignore: are MOOCs and other low-cost, online options a threat to higher education? Here there was some disagreement among the panelists. One view was that these options provide new opportunities for higher education, such as using the flipped classroom to better utilize time for personal interactions with faculty, or the ability to teach more students at a low cost. Another view was that this is undoubtedly a threat to the status quo. Low-cost providers are driving prices down by offering courses really close to the margin, and when those courses qualify for ACE or NCCRS credit recommendations, it is impossible to see this as anything other than competition. The more that these credit recommendations are accepted, along with CAEL's LearningCounts.org credit recommendations for the assessment of student portfolios, the more these independent organizations become "de facto accreditors."

PLA and Better Student Outcomes

There have been multiple studies in the last few years on the link between PLA and better student outcomes. In 2010, CAEL's *Fueling the Race to Postsecondary Success* study examined the records of more than 62,000 students at 48 postsecondary institutions and found that adult students with PLA credit were two-and-a-half times more likely to graduate than adult students without PLA credit.

A 2011 College Board study of students with credit through CLEP exams found that those students graduated in less time and with higher GPAs. (See http://clep.collegeboard.org/research/statistics.)

At the summit, Patricia Book of ACE reported that in a recent survey of students, ACE found that students' top goals for using ACE credit recommendations were 1) to attain the intended degree (51%) and 2) attain it faster (43%).

Role of Employers

The panelists noted that employers are beginning to embrace MOOCs and other online courses. In countries like Brazil, the Open Courseware Consortium has found that employers are sponsoring courses as a pathway to employment. Similarly, some employers in the U.S. are taking Coursera course certifications seriously. Students completing Coursera courses are finding that the courses can sometimes help them get jobs. Echoing the remarks of Margaret Spellings, the panelists noted that in the future, employers could choose bundles of MOOCs that they care about for their workforce, relying on this more customized approach to training and development—or job seeker screening—rather than on formal postsecondary degrees and credentials.

Accreditation Issues

The attendees recognized that as assessments take on a larger role within higher education, regional and national accreditors will need to focus their quality review efforts on assessments. Accreditors will need to weigh in on which standards and guidelines should be used in the development of competency-based programs, how a student's identity is authenticated for assessment purposes, and whether different levels of accreditation are needed (e.g., course-level accreditation).

What We Can Do

The summit attendees were enthusiastic about working together to advance the use of competency assessments in higher education. The summit concluded with a discussion among attendees about how to get the word out about the importance of outcome and competency assessments in the changing landscape of higher education.

To **raise societal awareness** of the many validated options that exist for earning low-cost credits toward degree requirements, we will need to:

- **Develop a comprehensive public relations campaign** that has a strong message and a national spokesperson. Develop customized messages and delivery methods (including social networks) for specific audiences, such as employers, policy makers, guidance counselors, students, and "influencers." Leverage the interest of philanthropic foundations to hold national meetings on the topic.
- **Tell the stories** of real students who have completed competency-based assessments in their journey to earn a postsecondary degree or credential.
- **Share the research that supports the value proposition** of PLA and other approaches that recognize learning no matter where and how it takes place.
- **Conduct new research** that examines student outcomes in selected fields.
- **Advocate for federal policy change** that will support these approaches, particularly changes in the financial aid regulations and the Higher Education Act.
- **Advocate for employer support** of PLA and competency-based programs in tuition assistance policies.
- **Showcase the options available** to students and provide a way for students to search for the right options. Use opportunities like the Open Education Week (first week in March) to show options for low-cost, free, and open learning.

To **encourage more educational institutions** to accept a variety of assessments, we should:

- **Educate regional accreditors about** these programs and urge them to develop quality guidelines that specifically encourage the use of PLA and other assessments.
- **Share the research on the retention benefits** (e.g., student graduation rates and persistence) of PLA and other approaches that recognize learning no matter where and how it takes place.
- **Share information** about how using assessment and low-cost learning options can help boost enrollment.
- **Conduct research on the benefits for job placement and career success** of students who have earned credentials via competency-based assessments.

- **Provide a MOOC course** for faculty on PLA and competency-based programs.
- **Influence the influencers**, including American Association of Community Colleges, governors, legislatures, and workforce investment boards.

To meet growing needs for assessment, particularly those that are linked to degree requirements:

- **Develop new assessments of students' competencies** that can be linked to program or degree frameworks. Some attendees noted that a standard competency framework would be ideal in order to enable transferability between programs. Such a framework would draw on the Lumina Foundation's Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP). (For example, CAEL acknowledged that it is beginning to work on incorporating competencies into the portfolio assessment process through LearningCounts.org.)

- **Develop higher-fidelity and more cost effective performance assessments**. For example, Tata Interactive Systems shared several new kinds of learning assessments that make greater use of technology, including avatars in specific scenarios that can be developed with input from faculty as well as from employers and trade groups. These can be designed to assess higher order competencies, such as critical thinking or problem solving. Some attendees also suggested developing more psychometrically sound assessments.

- **Encourage new entrants and greater competition** in the development and offering of competency assessments. This will help foster innovations that can create more efficient and effective assessment tools.

- **Establish a new entity—a National Council on Postsecondary Assessment**—to provide oversight and leadership, and to serve as a repository of information on available assessments and to help avoid duplication of assessments.

- **Embed assessments in learning activities**. Project-based learning can incorporate assessment in order to demonstrate how students learn by doing. Adaptive learning methods and simulations may also be good strategies to achieve greater efficiency and to engage students.

- **Encourage institutions to work together to develop shared assessments**. Developing rigorous assessments is a costly enterprise. Sustainability of approaches that use assessments requires transferability of the assessments.

- **Involve faculty** in the development of assessments, and the process should be transparent in order to ensure buy-in.

- **Develop better methods for student identity authentication for assessments,** particularly in online environments. Better tools are needed for security in proctoring exams and assessments, particularly those connected to MOOCs and other online education and training.

- **Develop strategies to ease students' fear of testing.**

Conclusion

We are currently at a time of extraordinary change in higher education. With new models for instruction and assessment emerging, and with interest in competency-based programs at an all-time high, it is critical for leaders in this field to act in order to foster continued growth, ensure quality, and eliminate redundant efforts. We need a vehicle to ensure that existing assessments are used (not re-invented), we need an advocacy effort for policies that support competency-based approaches, we need more research to inform institutions and policy makers, and we need a communications strategy to reach students, employers, and the general public. The "tidal wave" of new programs is a sign that things are changing. For the tidal wave to evolve into a functioning and coordinated system of learning and credentials, we need to develop an infrastructure that supports it and ensures its quality.

Endnotes

1 See http://www.cael.org/pdfs/2012_CompetencyBasedPrograms.

2 For further reading, see Cavanaugh, J. C. (2011, December). "The future of accreditation: When learners do it themselves," closing plenary address, Middle States Commission on Higher Education, Washington, DC. Retrieved from http://www.msche.org/documents/TheFutureofAccreditationCavanaugh.pdf. See also Cavanaugh, J. C. (2011, December 14). "Accreditation in an era of open resources," *Inside Higher Education*. Retrieved from http://www.insidehighered.com/views/2011/12/14/cavanaugh essay how accreditation must change era open resources.

Appendix: List of Attendees

Deborah Amory
Acting Provost, Office of Academic Affairs
Empire State College

John Bailey
Executive Director, Digital Learning Now
Senior Advisor, Whiteboard Advisors

Carolyn Baker
Chief, Voluntary Education Programs
Military Community & Family Policy

Diana Bamford-Rees
Associate VP for Higher Education/
Event Manager,
CAEL

Margaretia Benitez
CAEL Consultant

Keith Bird
Senior Policy Fellow for Workforce and Postsecondary Education,
Corporation for a Skilled Workforce

Patricia Book
Assistant Vice President of the Center for Lifelong Learning,
American Council on Education (ACE)

Wayne Brown
Vice President, Extended Education
Excelsior College

Adam Bush
Cofounder/Director of Curriculum,
College Unbound

Patrick Campbell
Policy Analyst,
CFPB

John Cavanaugh
Chancellor,
PASSHE

Marie Cini
Acting Provost and Chief Academic Officer,
University of Maryland University College

Stacey Clawson
Competencies Program Officer,
Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation

Kris Clerkink
Executive Director, Innovation Labs
Southern New Hampshire University

Jeff Davidson
Saylor Foundation

John Ebersole
President,
Excelsior College

Rhonda Epper
Vice Provost,
Colorado Community College System

Paul Fain
Writer,
Inside Higher Education

Wilson Finch
Completion Innovation Challenge Grant Coordinator,
Tennessee Higher Education Commission

Mary Lou Forward
Executive Director,
Open Courseware Consortium (OCW Consortium)

Evelyn Ganzglass
Director, Workforce Development
CLASP

Tina Grant
National College Credit Recommendation Service (NCCRS)

Mary Beth Hanner
Provost,
Excelsior College

Susan Henken-Thielen
UExcel Brand Director,
Pearson

Mika Hoffman (Only Tuesday)
Executive Director,
Center for Educational Measurement
Excelsior College

Kathleen Howley
Sr. Associate Vice Chancellor,
Academic and Student Affairs
PASSHE

Patrick Jones
Vice Provost,
Excelsior College

Bryan Kanter
TaTa Interactive Systems

Andrew P. Kelly
Research Fellow, Education Policy Studies
American Enterprise Institute

Becky Klein-Collins
Director of Research,
CAEL

Ed Klonoski
President,
Charter Oak State College

Amy Laitinen
Deputy Director, Higher Education
New America Foundation

Chari Leader Kelley
Vice President for LearningCounts.org,
CAEL

Doug Lederman
Editor,
Inside Higher Education

Gary Matkin
Dean of Extension,
University of California, Irvine

Mark Michalisin
Executive Director of Business Development, Center for Educational Measurement,
Excelsior College

Jessica Moats
Manager of Academic Partnership,
StraighterLine

Andrew Ng
Co-Founder,
Coursera

David Paris
Executive Director,
New Leadership Alliance for Student Learning and Accountability

Martha Parker
Assessment Consultant,
eLumen Collaboratie, LLC

Steve Phillips
Content Development Associate,
Saylor Foundation

Shirley Pippins
President,
Victory University

George Pruitt
President,
Thomas Edison State College

George Reid
PASSHE

Terrel L. Rhodes
Vice President,
AAC&U

Devon Ritter
Special Projects Administrator,
Saylor Foundation

Paul Rybinski
Senior Assessment Specialist,
ETS

Cathy Sandeen
Vice President,
Education Attainment and Innovation
American Council on Education (ACE)

Elena Silva
Senior Associate,
Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching

Marc Singer
Associate Provost, Center for the Assessment of Learning
Thomas Edison State College

Burck Smith
CEO,
StraighterLine

Margaret Spellings
Senior Advisor,
U.S. Chamber of Commerce
U. S. Secretary of State 2005-2009

Sharon Spooler
Chief Marketing Officer,
StraighterLine

Pamela Tate
President and CEO, CAEL

Constance Tsai
Director of CLEP Academic Initiatives, College Board

Brett Visger
Deputy Chancellor,
Ohio Board of Regents

Judith Wertheim
Vice President for Higher Education, CAEL

Christine Wihak
Director, PLAR
Thompson Rivers University,
BC Centre for Open Learning

Richard Yep
Chair, Board of Trustees
Excelsior College

John Zappa
CEO,
EdLink

APPROACHES TO COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION AND ASSESSMENT

COMPETENCIES

PERSONALIZED

MODULAR COURSES

STUDENT-CENTERED

PLA

ASSESSMENT

DEMONSTRATION

Competency-Based Education at Northern Arizona University: Personalized Learning and Assessment of Learning

Alison Brown and Fred Hurst, Northern Arizona University

Competency-based education, or "direct assessment" as the U.S. Department of Education terms it, has been in the news over the past few months. Those of us who have been in distance, adult, and continuing education know that this is not a new concept. Many of us have been involved in competency-based education for decades. We believe the primary reason this is now in the news is that there is now an acceptance at the highest levels in both higher education and public policy sectors that competency-based education is a solution to many of the issues facing higher education, including producing more baccalaureate degrees at a lower cost. Two actions at the federal level underscore this acceptance. In his 2013 State of the Union address, President Obama endorsed competency-based education, and the U.S. Department of Education recently issued a "Dear Colleague" letter encouraging institutions to innovate with competency-based approaches. This brings competency-based education into the mainstream.

In late 2012, Northern Arizona University (NAU) started to plan a new and innovative approach to providing a higher education experience that recognized that every student is unique. The initiative, known as "Personalized Learning" and which started enrolling students in spring 2013, enables motivated students to earn a high-quality degree more efficiently and at a lower cost by customizing coursework to fit individual learning styles and previously acquired knowledge. Our idea at NAU was to reinvent higher education from scratch. Up until now, our distance learning efforts have been incremental, or a "bolt on," to what we were already doing. Online courses are largely adaptations of what faculty has been doing in the classroom for a century and a half. Using the best of the innovative ideas and the newest technologies of the last few years, NAU has re-imagined how higher education can be delivered.

Personalized Learning: customized coursework to fit individual learning styles and previously acquired knowledge.

Every student is different, and yet our K-20 education systems have a tendency to treat all students as if they were the same. NAU's approach is that we do not care how students learn a concept, skill, or competency. It matters only that they have learned it. Students may prove their competency by transferring in a course, passing a standardized test (CLEP, AP, DSST/DANTES, ACE), taking a pretest before starting a Personalized Learning course, or successfully completing the end-of-course assessment. The courses are interdisciplinary, build off one another, and are the length needed for the learning, not an arbitrary three credit hours long. Students study at their own pace according to their capability, prior knowledge, and motivation. They may start the program any day of the year and complete the study of a lesson when they feel they have achieved competency. They cannot fail a course; they merely go back and study more if they do not score highly on the end-of-course assessment. Adaptive learning analytics steer the students towards the modality (lecture, text, documentary, simulation, game) that is most likely to help them be successful in learning. If a student learns best by reading articles, articles will be offered to that student first. The student who understands concepts through watching a lecture will be offered that modality. Because each student is unique, time to competency also differs. And students have varying strengths across subject matter. Students pay for time, not number of achieved competencies. The quicker they progress to degree completion, the less it will cost them.

Creative Learning for Creative Economies

Educational transformations do not occur in a vacuum. Our technological worlds are in flux, as are our ways of interacting socially, doing business, and arranging our cities and their environs. Richard Florida (2002) refers to the "creative class" as the class that drives innovation in industry. Importantly, what he calls "creative cities" are the places where members of that class want to live and work. As creators of programs for workforce development, Personalized Learning must pay attention, then, not only to developments in educational technology but also to evolving demands from businesses that will hire, retain, and promote Personalized Learning's graduates.

Florida has recently (2012) issued a 10th anniversary edition of *The Rise of the Creative Class*. In his revised edition, Florida analyzes the role education plays in developing the creative class. What is needed, he argues, is an education system that spurs, not squelches, creativity:

> *Education has to be more about engaging students and supporting them with good teachers and mentors than standardized test scores. We need to put their creativity first, not rote learning and test preparation.*

Personalized Learning has creative thinking as a primary goal. Assessment is an integral part of how Personalized Learning will determine how well it is doing in that regard.

While it is an exciting time to be in higher education, there are disconnects between the excitement and the reality. *The Economist* recently devoted much of an issue to "America's Competitiveness" (March 16, 2013). In the article on educational reform, oft-cited studies are summarized:

> *In spite of the high unemployment rate, many businesses complain that they cannot find enough qualified candidates to fill their vacancies. A survey conducted last year by McKinsey, a consultancy, found that 87% of educational institutions thought they had prepared their students well for employment, but only 49% of employers agreed that their new employees had the training they needed. A similar survey of American manufacturing firms in 2011 by Deloitte, another consultancy, found that 67% had trouble finding the right people, and that 5% of their jobs remained unfilled for lack of suitable applicants.*

These surveys focus on vocational education. Students' chances of success in their professional lives, and as members of civil society, improve dramatically when creative thinking has been foundational. Assessment in the Personalized Learning program and of student progress will provide faculty and students information to rapidly stay on track and to help close the so-called "skills gap." Personalized Learning uses a very broad array of assessments to that end.

Personalized Learning aims to minimize the feeling that knowledge is something secret that students need to learn how to access.

Personalized Assessment of Learning

Student progress in Personalized Learning is reported to each student almost immediately. Our innovative technology supports fast and personalized responses. As students perform activities in their courses, they will receive feedback on their performance as it relates to their particular learning plan. Students will not only know where they stand, they will know the areas on which they should focus most work and attention.

Good assessment is transformative. Assessment aims to improve courses and programs because of our institutional commitment to improving the intellectual and material lives of students and alumni. To help students better realize their possibilities in creative and evolving economies, Personalized Learning allows and encourages students to have full access to assessment processes and results. Our technology shares the rubrics for all activities, tests, and papers with students. Having the additional knowledge of how they are learning and mastering material will increase students' power over their learning. Personalized Learning aims to minimize the feeling that knowledge is something secret that students need to learn how to access.

It is important that what we assess evolves as much as how we assess it.

Personalized Program Assessment

Program efficacy will also be closely monitored. Aggregate data on the relative success of students for each activity (e.g. paper, presentation, quiz, or exam) will be available to faculty in reports that are made available as frequently as daily, although some will only be run quarterly. Faculty will be able to change activities that are less successful than others and use the positive aspects of effective activities to improve those that are not as effective.

Numbers are useful and can present a sense of objectivity. Still, narrative is often our best avenue for understanding how well we are doing our work. Consequently, the use of surveys and advisory boards will also be an important aspect of Personalized Learning's assessment activities. Student satisfaction surveys will be administered regularly. Exit interviews for graduating students will be critical. Personalized Learning also plans to survey both employers and program alumni, asking specific questions based on the studies that reveal a difference in how institutions and businesses see each other.

It is not usual to think of advisory boards as a part of assessment. With Personalized Learning, they are an integral part. We will have two levels of board participation: board members and networkers. The hope is that the second group will be integrated into the first group about once every two years. Comprising people who can successfully navigate the worlds of Personalized Learning's majors, this group will serve three functions: to advise faculty on curriculum, to advise and help set up internships, and to talk about the work Personalized Learning is doing with colleagues. Even more personal than the narratives derived from surveys, the discussions Personalized Learning envisions having with these business communities will help shape the curriculum to meet the needs of a changing world. Advances in technology have made it possible to quickly adapt content and activities; working directly with industry leaders helps Personalized Learning make the best use of those advances.

In order to best serve students as we navigate together an evolving epistemic landscape, it is important that what we assess evolves as much as how we assess it. Creative thinking is important to building a meaningful and successful life. It is difficult to assess—but so was critical thinking at one time, and that problem, while not solved, is better addressed now than when its assessment began. We will need to learn how to assess the properties of the self-directed learner and the ability to apply foundational skills to arenas of knowing that maybe do not yet exist. These are challenges that will be best met in conversation and collaboration between students and their peers and between students and their professors. Technological advances in communication have enabled us to enlarge our communities and to share what we learn widely and quickly.

As new forms of learning emerge in universities and colleges, with their attendant innovative ways of assessment, we have better possibilities of helping each other understand how to assess the success of our efforts. Along the way, we may help transform not only ourselves, our students, and our institutions—but also generate the kind of "creative cities" that Richard Florida envisages.

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College for America: A New Approach for a New Workforce That Is Accessible, Affordable, and Relevant

By Jennifer Share, College for America at Southern New Hampshire University

What Is College for America?

College for America was constructed to shift the landscape of higher education and refine America's workforce by tackling the dual challenges of accountability and accessibility. Its creation will assist the nearly 40 million Americans who have yet to complete their degrees and the countless adults who thought college was simply beyond their reach.

Using an online, flexibly paced, competency-based model, College for America focuses on helping students build essential personal and professional skills rather than credit hours and grade points. Breaking through the barriers to a college degree—rising costs, limited access, lack of relevance, and the demands of work and family—College for America opens access to opportunity, promotion, and fulfillment for working adults at a low price point: $2,500 per year. It is the first program of its kind to be approved by a regional accreditation agency and by the U.S. Department of Education for Title IV financial aid support.

College for America was developed by the Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU) Innovation Lab. SNHU is a private, accredited, nonprofit university with over 150 undergraduate and graduate degree programs. SNHU is widely recognized as the largest nonprofit provider of online education in New England and the fourth largest in the U.S. Its traditional campus in Manchester, NH, serves over 3,500 students. SNHU is considered a leader in educational innovation and was #12 on Fast Company's (2012) "World's Most Innovative Companies List." College for America is the latest chapter in SNHU's long history of advancing those who are not served by traditional higher education.

Why College for America?

College for America was developed to tackle five challenges in higher education.

1. **The high cost of post-secondary education to students and employers.** Today's students are taking on substantial loan debt—now more than all U.S. credit card debt (Brown, Haughwout, Lee, Mabutas, & van der Klaauw, 2012)—to pay for college tuition, which is increasing much more quickly than inflation (College Board Advocacy and Policy Center, 2013). The rising cost of tuition is also an issue that employers care about given that many provide tuition assistance to their employees.

2. **The lack of access to higher education for tens of millions of workers.** Many, if not most, of these individuals will see limited career advancement without some college experience.

3. **Low persistence and graduation rates.** Work demands, family obligations, and full schedules make completing a degree through a traditional college nearly impossible for most working adults. Community colleges, often hailed as a solution for working adults, are seeing abysmally low graduation and transfer rates—less than 35 percent (U.S. Department of Education, 2010).

4. **The misalignment between what colleges teach and what employers say they need.** Employers report a shortage of the basic communication and leadership skills needed to succeed in the workplace, even among college graduates.

5. **Concerns about quality.** There is lack of clear evidence about what college graduates can actually do when they enter the workplace.

College for America focuses on helping students build essential personal and professional skills rather than credit hours and grade points.

College for America revitalizes today's time-fixed, faculty-centered, and high-cost model of education. By creating a student-centered, mentor-focused model where time is variable, the program allows learning to come to the students. The program gives students complete control over their learning. They choose which skills to tackle first and how long it will take to master those skills.

How Does College for America Work?

College for America is an "all-you-can-learn" model, designed with student persistence and success as primary goals. Tuition is all-inclusive, with no charges for books or other fees, at $1,250 for a six-month term or $2,500 per year. Currently students graduate with an associate of arts degree in general studies with a business emphasis. The degree is immediately transferable to other SNHU programs and institutions. Additional degree options are currently in development.

The program is built around 120 competencies rather than courses. Competencies are "can do" statements that express what graduates are expected to know and be able to do.

Examples include:

- Can negotiate with others to resolve conflicts and settle disputes
- Can work with others to accomplish a task
- Can speak effectively in order to persuade or motivate
- Can define and use marketing terminology and concepts
- Can generate a variety of approaches to addressing a problem
- Can distinguish fact from opinion
- Can convey information by creating charts and graphs

These competencies are organized into three clusters:

- **Foundational skills**, which include communication; critical and creative thinking; quantitative skills; and digital fluency and information literacy
- **Personal skills**, which include personal effectiveness; ethics and social responsibility; and teamwork and collaboration
- **Content knowledge**, which focuses on business essentials; as well as science, society, and culture.

By creating a student-centered, mentor-focused model where time is variable, the program allows learning to come to the students.

The competency-based approach focuses on learning, not seat time or credit hours. It ensures that students have acquired the most relevant and necessary workforce skills: communication, critical and creative thinking, and collaboration and teamwork. College for America's curriculum, grounded in well-regarded frameworks of higher education, rests on the building blocks of Lumina Foundation's Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP) and the U.S. Department of Labor competency models, among others.

Students demonstrate mastery of competencies by completing projects, which are authentic, engaging tasks that enable students to learn by doing. Clear, relevant projects and assessments ensure mastery of essential competencies, one step at a time.

Examples include:

- Creating a marketing plan
- Analyzing an ad
- Developing a budget
- Conducting online research
- Writing a paragraph

Projects come complete with everything a student needs, including an overview, detailed directions, a scoring guide, projects resources, and skill-building tips. Students can select their own project paths to reach their goals. Students can select a path with multiple simple projects or a single, complex project. Individuals must complete three complex projects in order to graduate. (See examples in the boxes on the next page.)

Assessment is at the heart of College for America. Students are incrementally and frequently assessed to ensure their mastery of skills. The program does not use a traditional grading scale. Students either complete a project and progress to the next one, or continue to submit a project until they achieve mastery. There is no grade inflation or "sliding by" in the program. Students have either demonstrated mastery of a competency, or they are still working on it. Students who have learned through life or work experience can move quickly. College for America recognizes the value of prior learning; students can apply skills they already have to progress.

Personalized support and community engagement strengthen students' advancement. Learning Coaches, a combination academic advisor and life coach, help students move through the program as efficiently as possible. Student-chosen Workplace Mentors focus on career development; and Accountability Partners, like "workout buddies," provide the motivation to keep learners on track. College for America Reviewers provide constructive feedback to students within 48 hours of their project submission. Reviewers have advanced degrees, and they have experience teaching college-level courses and using scoring rubrics. The 24/7 Help Desk and ample free, online resources help students learn and practice.

College for America's Lessons Learned

College for America launched in January 2013 and, as of August, had enrolled nearly 500 students. Over the course of that time several key outcomes have emerged:

- **Personalized learning at scale.** The College for America platform was built for scale. Automated workflows have been created for Coaches, Reviewers, and help desk technicians to allow them to support thousands, if not hundreds of

SAMPLE PROJECT

SIMPLE Competency: Can write a paragraph

Project: Write a paragraph describing an item you have recently purchased. Explain what you want this item to do. Why did you choose this particular item over others? Begin your paragraph with a topic sentence, including your main idea. Develop the point by using supportive examples. Use correct spelling and punctuation.

Resources: Skill-building resources include help with writing paragraphs and using correct spelling and punctuation.

SAMPLE PROJECT

COMPLEX Competencies:
- Can use logic, reasoning, and analysis to address a problem
- Can write a business memo
- Can use a spreadsheet to perform calculations
- Can synthesize material from multiple sources
- Can evaluate information and its sources critically

Project: Your boss has asked you to write a formal memo evaluating two potential vendors for a new vending machine for the employee lounge. Recommend one vendor to your boss and justify your reasoning. Read and analyze the relevant material and perform any necessary calculations. Use correct spelling and grammar, and spellcheck your work before submitting it.

Resources: Project resources include proposals from the potential vendors, as well as advertising brochures and the results of an employee-opinion survey. Skill-building resources include help with writing business memos and using spreadsheets.

thousands, of students. In addition, the platform has been created to allow each student to feel connected to the larger College for America community. The user interface shows pace and progress towards academic goals; chat functions and discussion boards allow students to connect with one another and create a sense of family.

- **The importance of a human touch cannot be underestimated.** To create a personalized learning environment and to allow students the best chance for persistence to graduation, human connectivity is a must. Learning Coaches are considered the lynchpin of the program. Coaches assist students with their pace and progress and help with overcoming academic and personal barriers.
- **Regular reporting and data analysis are critical to the development of our continuous and incremental improvement processes.** As in the traditional education sector, quantitative and qualitative data are collected on a variety of factors, including rate of task completion, resource use, community participation, and career progression, etc. College for America uses these data and an agile process to make well-informed and ongoing improvements to every aspect of the program. As College for America has evolved, student progress data, focus groups, and surveys have all been used to stay responsive to both student and employer needs.

Why Are Employers Key?

College for America is offered to individuals only in conjunction with their employers. The program is based on the concept that employers provide students with a necessary layer of support and motivation. Employers can improve employees' confidence by telling them, "I believe in you. I believe you can be successful in College for America and will graduate with a degree." Many employer partners also provide tuition assistance and loan forgiveness programs to their employees, in addition to providing on-site space to study both during and after work hours. Equally important are the career pathways employers create to give students an understanding of where they can progress in the organization with additional experience and a college degree.

College for America offers employers an effective, low-cost addition to educational benefits programs, an efficient path to develop the workforce, and a proven way to retain employees. Many employees who seek advancement are held back in their careers if they do not have a degree. More access to opportunity means stability in the workforce. With a program to "become all they can be," employees can increase their value as contributing members of their organizations and communities. Developing leadership and innovation for the future, College for America ensures that American business remains on track for excellence.

Breaking New Ground in Higher Education—The Way Forward

In April 2013, College for America obtained approval from the U.S. Department of Education (DOE) to be eligible for Title IV, Higher Education Act funding. This is the first competency-based model in the nation to be approved by the DOE under the direct assessment provisions that pay for actual learning versus seat time. Under direct assessment provisions, federal financial aid funds pay for measurable learning, not time-based units of curriculum.

"I am excited that Southern New Hampshire University is leading the way with its competency-based associate degree program," said Under Secretary of Education Martha Kanter. "Our nation needs more individuals with the knowledge, skills, and training to strengthen our nation's economy, and College for America's self-paced approach and partnerships with business is an example of the kind of innovation we hope to see across the nation" (College for America, 2013).

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UMUC and Competency-Based Education

By Cynthia Davis and Marie Cini, University of Maryland University College

In the current environment of rapid educational change and growing interest in competency-based approaches, UMUC is developing its version of this modality that builds on what we have already been doing to assess student learning and map it to competencies. UMUC has long recognized that adult students bring prior college-level learning when they enter higher education, and there are benefits to the students when a university helps them to recognize and reflect upon that learning. By validating adult students' college-level experience, skills, and knowledge gained both inside and outside of the college classroom, UMUC assists students to value their prior college-level learning from various sources such as transfer credit, portfolio assessment, noncollegiate instruction, external exams and certifications, and independent study. This leads to a shorter pathway to a degree, saving both time and money for students.

UMUC recognizes college-level learning gained outside the classroom through:

1. Prior Learning Validation Modalities, including:
   - Our Prior Learning portfolio assessment program, created in 1978 and recently revised
   - Course Challenge, awarding credit for knowledge demonstrated in UMUC-designed assessments
   - Credit for standardized exams such as DSST, CLEP, and industry certification exams
   - Noncollegiate learning (military and corporate) evaluated by ACE (American Council on Education)
2. New Learning Modalities, including:
   - Workplace Learning, which identifies and evaluates learning gained on the job
   - Online, hybrid, and other forms of instructor-mediated learning
   - Individualized Study

UMUC faculty evaluates prior learning and workplace learning against the same learning outcomes as those gained through undergraduate coursework. That alignment was reinforced by the recent redesign of the undergraduate curriculum, which identified and mapped real-world learning outcomes for every program and course; developed faculty training and teaching guides to support the outcomes; and identified appropriate assessments. As a result, all the ways of fulfilling degree requirements – experiential learning, transfer and externally evaluated credit, and classroom instruction – can be aligned to the same outcomes, with different modes of learning recognized within an overall competency framework. The formal curriculum, thus, is the standard by which any form of learning can be honored. Students must demonstrate their proficiency of program and course outcomes no matter how they learned the content.

Students must demonstrate their proficiency of program and course outcomes no matter how they learned the content.

This alignment and UMUC's experience with experiential learning allow us to take a unique approach to competency-based education—one which recognizes and integrates prior learning without requiring students to enter an entirely separate program with different admission requirements and procedures. That is, most students will require a combination of validation of their current college-level learning along with learning new knowledge in a degree program. Each student will likely have a different prior learning profile and thus need a different set of new knowledge to achieve their educational outcomes. Therefore, we designed a model wherein students can achieve their education through a combination of evaluation of different sources of knowledge along with learning new material in online, hybrid, or workplace learning experiences. This model requires greater individualized guidance to accommodate different experiences, and our new university advising model is being redesigned to move in this direction.

Because competency-based learning is experiencing a surge of interest nationally, UMUC is developing a more explicit and comprehensive model to actively promote and develop alternate ways of demonstrating competency and thereby maximizing students' opportunities to gain credit and accelerate academic progress toward a degree. The model will translate competency-based assessment into the more traditional credit-based approach so that undergraduate students would still earn 120 credits in order to earn a degree.

Principles

Early evaluation of the model will be conducted using two or three programs, but we expect to build the same competency-based approach for every undergraduate program over a three-year period. We will embrace a continued openness to accepting credit (and the learning it represents) from a variety of sources—including transfer, evaluation of experiential and workplace-based learning, and additional learning throughout the lifespan—allowing students to combine different types of credit earned for a variety of types of learning.

Our approach translates the achievement of learning competencies into traditional credit, supported by technological and administrative systems that allow students alternative methods for demonstrating competency: i.e., classroom based learning, online learning, experiential learning, prior learning, and other sources of credit. Importantly, we are mapping the initial competency-based programs in terms of competencies and alternatives for achieving them.

In concert with mapping competencies of our programs, we are modularizing the curriculum (similar to Kentucky's Learn on Demand)[1] to allow more detailed alignment to competencies and recognition of student progress. The expansion, integration, and restructuring of UMUC's experiential (e.g., prior or current learning achieved through experience) and prior learning programs, so that academic departments oversee all forms of competency assessment, whether through formal curricula or alternative assessments, are also in development.

We are working in partnership with our enrollment management colleagues to implement a new advising model that emphasizes early assessment, competency tracking, and support throughout the student life cycle.

Expansion of academic roles

Some believe that a competency-based model of education eliminates the faculty role. In fact, in our work, we believe that faculty will enjoy expanded roles. A competency-based approach to education enhances the traditional faculty role, including:

- Development of appropriate assessments
- Assessment evaluators
- Mentors, tutors, and learning coaches
- Partnerships with employers and certification agencies
- Alignment of competencies with career opportunities
- Continuous monitoring of competency alignment

Summary

At UMUC we have long honored the prior learning that adults bring to the college classroom. As competency-based models continue to gain a foothold in higher education, UMUC is excited to be an early adopter. With a belief that adults bring prior learning and seek new learning, our model will provide individualized pathways at scale to serve the particular educational needs of each student. This model is, by necessity, integrated systematically across the University so that students are served in a seamless manner. It requires nothing short of a complete overhaul of our approach to learning. As an early adopter of online education, we know the value and importance of developing the next model of high-quality education for adult students that is also flexible, adaptable, and affordable. Competency-based models promise to be the next frontier in that revolution, and UMUC will develop unique models in order to continue serving our adult students.

Endnote

1 See http://learnondemand.kctcs.edu/

ACCREDITATION AND FEDERAL POLICY

QUALITY OUTCOMES

LEARNING

PERFORMANCE

OPEN EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES

DEGREE COMPLETION

A Conversation about Outcomes, Assessment, and Accreditation with Ralph Wolff

By Becky Klein-Collins, Director of Research, CAEL

Ralph Wolff is president and CEO of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC), the accrediting body for California and Hawaii. The following is from an interview with him in May 2013 on the topics of competency-based education (CBE), prior learning assessment (PLA), new online learning opportunities, and changes facing higher education today.

CAEL: Lumina Foundation has developed and promoted the Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP) as a common framework for defining and aligning the outcomes of associate, bachelor's, and master's degrees.[1] Two years ago, WASC received a grant from Lumina to explore how to use the DQP in the accreditation process. What activities were funded by this grant, and what did WASC learn during the grant period?

Ralph Wolff: The back history of WASC's work with the DQP actually goes back to 1998, when WASC went through a three-year redesign process to be more outcomes-based. In this redesign, which was launched in 2001, the goal was to engage institutions to become learning centers, even if they had a research orientation. We included the idea that degrees needed to be defined in terms of entry-level characteristics, and that degrees are more than just an accumulation of credits. We wanted degrees to have meaning. In 2008, we further revised our handbook to include a new focus on retention and graduation, and we recognized that we needed also to ensure that our degrees were of high quality.

Around that same time, WASC started talking with Lumina and with people like Carol Geary Schneider, Peter Ewell, and Molly Broad. Part of our discussions were about whether a framework like the DQP would be useful. When I shared with the [Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities] what the DQP was about, they were supportive of continuing to work with Lumina on this. So when the DQP was drafted, we were in a position to use it in our redesign process. WASC received a grant of $1.5 million from Lumina to support the redesign of our accrediting process to address the changing landscape in higher education, greater transparency [from our organization], changing accountability, completion, the meaning of a degree, and how to assure the quality of learning. The grant was also to support piloting the DQP as a way of getting at a number of these issues.

> **The DQP provided a useful framework for institutions to use to do a self-inquiry on the meaning of their degrees.**

In the redesign process, one of our task force groups was focused on the DQP and how to move forward with assessment of learning. Representatives from a wide range of public and private institutions reviewed the DQP and found that it provided a useful framework for institutions to use to do a self-inquiry on the meaning of their degrees. The task force put forth several recommendations on the institution's responsibility for ensuring the quality and rigor of their degrees, and one recommendation was that institutions consider the use of the DQP as a tool for exploring the meaning, quality, and integrity of a degree.

Initially, we hit a buzz saw with this recommendation. Our research universities were concerned that the DQP came from Lumina and not their faculties, and they were worried that WASC would impose the DQP on everyone. A second set of concerns was about reifying the five skill areas of the DQP [Applied Learning; Intellectual Skills; Specialized Knowledge; Broad, Integrative Knowledge; and Civic Learning] to the exclusion of other skills such as creativity and innovation. It took us about a year to work through these issues and assure institutions that they still define their degrees independently.

This year, we are launching a new handbook for institutions, and, in it, we say that we require all institutions to address the meaning and quality of their degrees. In doing so, an institution may choose to use the DQP (as well as Association of American Colleges and Universities' LEAP and VALUE rubrics) as tools. This handbook will be in effect for new institutions as of July 2013, and for all institutions in the fall of 2014. In addition, we are running workshops on the meaning, quality, and integrity of a degree and how the DQP can be helpful. We are also providing workshops on how to evaluate core competencies [e.g., critical thinking and information literacy] without using the silver bullet of a single test.

In addition to this redesign work, and as part of the Lumina grant, WASC offered any institution in the region an opportunity to work with us and pilot the use of the DQP. Twenty-eight institutions have been working with the DQP for over a year now. Brandman University and The Master's College have used the DQP as a framework for looking at their degree programs and revising them, and they have been using the DQP in a transformative way. Other institutions are using it to bring faculty together to understand how to address the meaning, quality, and integrity of a degree.

CAEL: There has been growing interest in competency-based approaches in higher education, in which competencies define the degree and students are assessed to ensure that they have the required competencies. In some cases, these programs have moved away from any seat time requirements—the only thing that matters is what the student knows and can do. The U.S. Department of Education recently approved one of these degree programs for financial aid eligibility through the direct assessment provision, potentially opening doors for other programs to follow suit. Do these programs require a different kind of approval or review process from accreditors? If so, what is different? What issues are accreditors working through to respond to these new competency-based programs?

The word "competency" is not a pejorative. It is about knowing and doing.

Wolff: We need to be clear that, first of all, the word "competency" is not a pejorative, even though some people use it that way. It is about knowing and doing. WASC and other accreditors have lots of experience reviewing competency-based programs that are still on the credit hour. We also have experience moving institutions toward more measurement of what students know and are able to do.

We need to distinguish between competency-based programs and the "direct assessment" programs that are in the news right now. There are many institutions that would like to explore the direct assessment approach and, like many innovations, it is still unclear what the ground rules are. It's also unclear what the benefits are in terms of reduced cost or improved student learning. We need a lot more experience.

Right now there are two review processes for direct assessment programs. Before the U.S. Department of Education will review a program for the direct assessment exemption for financial aid, the department requires that the accreditor review the program for quality. But the Department of Education has not made clear what standards should be used, so you could have two parties looking at the same program and coming to different conclusions.

As of today, New England Association of Schools and Colleges has approved College for America [Southern New Hampshire University's new program]. WASC is reviewing an MBA program at Argosy University, with Brandman University in the wings. The Higher Learning Commission has at least four programs in consideration for a pilot stage. WASC is prepared to evaluate these programs. We have a template and will develop rubrics. While it's new terrain in terms of seat time, we are prepared to evaluate in terms of quality.

One challenge is demonstrating the efficacy of the approach that is used by the institution. Some of these institutions are using learning adaptive software. We think we're developing the capac-

Articulating to students what they should know and be able to do can help students understand how to direct their work to the areas they don't know well.

ity to evaluate this. Another challenge could be attrition. What do students do if they want to leave a program after a year? One idea is that the receiving institution can look at the set of competencies and treat it like a portfolio assessment. Institutions are thinking through this issue.

Another challenge is, of course, financial aid. We will need to figure out the financial aid coverage of these programs outside of a time-based model.

My own view is that there is value in these experiments. Articulating to students what they should know and be able to do can help students understand how to direct their work to the areas they don't know well. Also, giving students a range of time to complete learning activities, and assess competence—this has enormous potential because everyone learns at a different pace. To say that everyone can learn the same amount of material in 14 weeks is not right. If we accept the course-based model as the standard, it's only because it's tradition. We know there is a range of learning embodied in every course.

CAEL: There have been other new developments in higher education in the last year or two. One of the hottest of these developments is the MOOC (massive open online course). How are WASC institutions responding to MOOCs? In what ways have higher education institutions embraced them? For what reasons have they not?

Wolff: WASC has published nine concept papers on the changing ecology of education by authors such as Sebastian Thrun, Paul LeBlanc, and Peter Ewell.[2] MOOCs are really just one part of a larger phenomenon of change in higher education. They are only a year old, but because of the pedigree of the instructors, they've captured everyone's attention—millions of people have signed up.

Accreditors don't accredit individual courses. But after talking with Coursera's Daphne Koller and Udacity's Sebastian Thrun on these issues, I would say that there are some issues for accreditors to consider. Accreditors need to pay attention when an institution embraces a MOOC entirely and give credit for it—without the institution contributing any work. An institution must be careful and deliberate awarding credit. Some Coursera and Straighterline courses have been reviewed by the American Council on Education (ACE)—those credits could be accepted. But many other courses haven't been reviewed. The institution where the MOOC faculty is from doesn't even award credit for that. The home institution of the MOOC faculty member isn't offering that course. But who is? Who is ensuring the quality and integrity of that course?

MOOCS offer enormous potential in terms of content. Whether it constitutes a whole course depends on the receiving institution assuring that the student has done all the requirements of the course and has been evaluated. At some point, there should be an external evaluation model developed to assure that there is systemic quality and integrity in these courses.

Ultimately, as accreditors, we need to indicate what kinds of activities institutions could undertake when awarding credit for these courses that would be acceptable to us. We should encourage innovative practices, such as what San Jose State is doing with Udacity—having faculty use MOOCs for three entry-level courses.[3] It's when an institution wants to grant credit just for a student taking a MOOC that problems arise. With the legislation currently being considered in California that requires public institutions to accept credits from private sector online courses, the same cautions apply. The way the legislation is currently written is very broad and appears to take things out of the hands of faculty. There are also some questions about where some of these massive online courses are appropriate for the students at these institutions.

But, as I said, MOOCs are still very new. The business model is just being formed and retention statistics are challenging at the moment – few people complete a course. Also, as Coursera's Andrew Ng has reported, over 70 percent of people taking MOOCs already have a credential. So judging MOOCs based on retention rate may be unfair. We need a lot more research and monitoring; we need an evaluation process to assure quality of these activities. But we need to be careful not to squelch innovation.

CAEL: As you know, CAEL got its start in promoting prior learning assessment for non-traditional learners, and many of our institutional members have long histories with PLA. What is the history of WASC with PLA, and has its view of PLA evolved in recent years?

Wolff: We have a long history of PLA. I was historically involved with Morris Keeton when CAEL was first established, and WASC has had CAEL speak at our annual meeting about adult learners. However, WASC's current PLA policy is comparatively regressive; it limits PLA to the undergraduate level and to 30 credit hours, for example. If we believe now that education is more about assessment of learning rather than where it occurs, and as we move towards more CBE programs, PLA will become more relevant and we will bump up against the PLA restrictions. I think we should be revising our policies on PLA and not be so restrictive.

I think we're at a moment of time where the meaning and quality of a credential is a question. The exclusivity of the institution in having control over credentials is under challenge, if not direct assault. There are a lot of entities that are selling credentials. They are saying that there are all kinds of learning that are not degree-based and not necessarily academic institution-based. Therefore, the next five to ten years will be about defining what credentials [academic institutions] are best suited for and what we are most credible at certifying. Eventually, you'll have lots of people who will want to assemble their degrees from various places and sources. We have a few institutions like Charter Oak and Excelsior—aggregators that will certify learning [regardless of the source]. I think we need more of these institutions to recognize the learning that people develop in their lives.

> We need to make our institutions more open for people to come in and out of throughout their lives, reflect on what they've learned, and build on it.

John Seeley Brown talks about a "remix society"—how, in our new understanding of learning, students build on what other people have done.[4] We need to make our institutions more open for people to come in and out of throughout their lives, reflect on what they've learned, and build on it. PLA is more than just making a degree quicker. In my experience, PLA is a powerful learning tool to build ongoing reflection. It's helping people see how to become learners throughout their lives. Institutions should be supporting it as a way to promote ongoing learning, not just shaving off time from the degree. To say that prior learning doesn't count makes no sense, and it cuts off a student from her own experience. Learning shouldn't do that. We should be building on learning. PLA is an important way to communicate to students that your prior learning is welcome here; we can build on that learning and make it stronger.

Endnotes

1 See http://www.luminafoundation.org/publications/The_Degree_Qualifications_Profile.pdf

2 See http://www.wascsenior.org/redesign/conceptpapers

3 See http://blogs.sjsu.edu/today/2013/sjsu-and-udacity-partnership/

4 See, for example, http://www.johnseelybrown.com/newlearning.pdf

Recommendations on Cracking the Credit Hour by Moving from Time to Learning

By Amy Laitinen, New America Foundation

The following is an excerpt from the white paper "Cracking the Credit Hour" by Amy Laitinen, published under a Creative Commons license in September 2012 by the New America Foundation and Education Sector. The excerpt outlines solutions for institutions to ensure financial aid eligibility for innovations such as competency-based education programs, even when those innovations are moving away from the time-based system of the credit hour. Since this white paper was published, the U.S. Department of Education has started reviewing and approving programs to be eligible for Title IV funding under the direct assessment provisions mentioned here, and institutions are beginning to develop proposals for experimental sites.

Brackets ([ ]) indicate editorial alterations to the excerpt. The full report can be found at www.newamerica.net.

In an era when college degrees are simultaneously becoming more important and more expensive, students and taxpayers can no longer afford to pay for time and little or no evidence of learning. Federal policy should encourage traditional institutions to think differently about how they deliver and award credit for learning and also create a space for nontraditional institutions and organizations to prove their ability to help students achieve real, objectively verified learning outcomes.

Lawmakers and regulators may be understandably reluctant to upend an imperfect, but well-known, system for an unknown one, particularly with hundreds of billions of dollars and millions of students' futures at stake. Luckily, we don't need a radical restructuring to start the move from time to learning. The Department of Education has three tools at its disposal right now that could allow for careful, controlled, and intentional experimentation with awarding federal financial aid based on learning, rather than time. These tools can seed innovative, lower-cost approaches to help students, and create the evidence base needed to expand a learning-based regulatory framework to higher education at large.

1) Innovate within an Existing Frame: The Credit Hour

The first tool the Department can use to move away from historic, time-based notions of a credit hour is the recently defined credit hour. Although the credit-hour definition was designed to curb federal financial aid abuse, it also created opportunities for institutions to use non-time-based measures of learning to qualify for federal financial aid. The Department can help institutions and accreditors translate alternative measures of learning into the equivalent credit hour framework that people already use and understand. Lest this sound too abstract, the Department can point to an existing institution that uses the credit hour, rather than seat time, to access federal financial aid. One that Education Secretary Arne Duncan says he wants "to be the norm," rather than the exception: WGU [Western Governors University].[1]

It may be surprising to learn that WGU's competency-based model uses, and receives federal aid for, credit hours. It wasn't supposed to. In fact, when WGU was in its infancy, it worked with the Department and Congress to come up with an entirely different way of awarding federal financial aid, one that would bypass credit hours altogether. This new method would allow for the "direct assessment" of student learning, rather than seat time. While Congress codified direct assessment into law in 2006, WGU ultimately chose not to use this new authority, working instead with the Department to cre-

Three Tools the Federal Government Can Use Now to Pay for Learning, Rather Than Time

1. The Credit Hour
2. Experimental Sites
3. Direct Assessment

atively translate its competencies into commonly understood credits.[2] Not coincidentally, the number of "competency units" that students are required to master is 120, the standard number of credit hours required for a bachelor's degree.

Although the final product is articulated in terms of credit hours, WGU's learning process is not based in time. Robert Mendenhall, president of WGU, describes the learning and conversion process this way:

> *We don't award three credit hours when people spend a certain amount of time learning something; we award three competency units when they master learning, independent of time. If a student can pass 40 competency units in that term, which would be equivalent to 40 credit hours, that's how much they can earn.*[3]

The Department made explicit in its credit-hour definition and guidance that the credit hour need not be based on seat time. It now needs to work with accreditors and institutions to show that it means it. Accreditors still need to sign off on the credit-awarding process and will only do so if they believe the Department will accept this approach. Although the Department may think it sent a clear message in its 2011 Dear Colleague Letter, the message was not widely received or believed. The Department should highlight the fact that WGU was eligible for financial aid before and after the adoption of the credit-hour definition to underscore that the regulation is not a primary barrier to innovation.

The Department must also recognize that the regulatory environment has created a significant level of uncertainty, which is, itself, a barrier to innovation. It must create a more encouraging climate repeatedly holding up innovative, quality practices that meet its definition of the credit hour. It should also publicly ask institutions and accreditors to use the credit hour in innovative ways to move from seat time to learning. While the Department may be obligated, given current law, to use the term credit hour, it could begin to simultaneously refer to credit hours in non-time-based terms, such as credit units or credit measures to signal its willingness to move from time to learning.

Despite the flexibility offered by the new credit-hour definition, the credit hour is laden with history and practice that measure education in terms of time. And "hour" is still in its name. The federal government should do everything it can to help push the historical boundaries of the credit hour, but it should also use other tools at its disposal—tools that are not anchored, either in history or name, to time.

2) Innovate through Experimentation: Experimental Sites

While there may be a great deal of flexibility under the new credit-hour definition, some innovations remain ineligible for financial aid due to language in the federal Higher Education Act, which governs financial aid. The Department may be reluctant to open the doors of the financial aid system too broadly, which could allow dishonest actors to take advantage of new flexibilities.

Fortunately, Congress has given the Department of Education a powerful tool with which to test and refine policy ideas. This rarely used provision of the Higher Education Act states that:

> *The Secretary is authorized to periodically select a limited number of additional institutions for voluntary participation as experimental sites to provide recommendations to the Secretary on the impact and effectiveness of proposed regulations or new management initiatives.*[4]

With this language, the Department can create a small, controlled, voluntary virtual laboratory of "experimental sites" on which it tests particular learning-based financial aid policies to see if they work, how they work, for whom they work, and under what conditions they work. It can get a sense of how the policy could be abused and create parameters that would prevent such abuse. It can then take the results of these experiments

Students who earn credits through PLA are more likely to stay in and complete college than those who don't, so it should be in everyone's interest to help students get credit for their prior learning.

to Congress, so that lawmakers can adopt policies to encourage the growth of the most successful experiments at a larger scale.

The Department should use this experimental authority to try out radical new ways of assessing and paying for learning. The Department should put out a notice asking institutions to both identify federal financial aid barriers to innovation and propose creative solutions that will allow institutions to award more, cheaper, and *better* degrees based on learning outcomes. The Department can then choose a number of experiments that it believes will help move institutions, accreditors, and the federal government away from time and to learning.

Here are three types of experiments the Department could pursue:

a) Pay to assess learning that occurs outside of a classroom toward a degree/credential.

In a learning-based system, an associate or bachelor's degree should mean that you know and can do specific things. Why should it matter where [a nontraditional student] learned, as long as she knows and can do what is expected? A tremendous amount of learning is currently being left uncredited, including learning acquired outside of a classroom and learning that occurs in non-credit college courses. This is a significant loss—nearly 40 percent of all community college students are enrolled in non-credit courses.[5] Many of these courses are workforce-oriented, designed to meet the specific needs of employers. The fact that these courses are not offered for credit often has less to do with their being credit-worthy than with employers wanting to bypass the slow process of having creditable courses approved through institutional processes. So employers get the benefit of having their workers educated quickly and students receive the benefits of the training. What these students don't receive, however, is college credit for their training, credit necessary to earn the all-important degrees.

A variety of Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) processes exist to help students with diverse experiences translate college-level learning into credit [...]. Students who earn credits through PLA are more likely to stay in and complete college than those who don't, so it should be in everyone's interest to help students [...] get credit for their prior learning.[6] Unfortunately, although many institutions "allow" for some form of PLA, the variety is often limited, and too few advisers, admissions counselors, and faculty members even know what the institution's PLA policies are. In practice, this makes the PLA option unavailable to millions of students who could use it. This is probably due in no small part to the fact that students cannot use federal financial aid to pay for PLA.

An experimental site could allow financial aid to be used to cover the cost of assessing prior learning. This amount would be less—in many cases much less—than what is awarded for traditional credits, since no funds are needed to underwrite instructional costs, living expenses, etc. Guidelines would have to be carefully crafted to ensure that bad actors are not simply awarding credit for life experience, in an effort to get their hands on a piece of the financial aid pie.

b) Pay after learning outcomes are demonstrated.

In this experimental site, students would receive all or some portion of their aid (and institutions would agree to be paid) only after learning outcomes are mastered. This approach could allow the federal government to experiment with moving away from seat time while reducing the possibility of fraudulent use of federal aid. New York State uses this outcomes- based financial

Possible Financial Aid Experiments

a. Pay to assess learning that occurs outside of a classroom.
b. Pay after learning outcomes are demonstrated.
c. Pay for learning outside of traditional faculty and institutional boundaries.

aid model for low-income students in competency-based programs (including Excelsior students). This approach would require contending with some difficult questions, such as what percentage of financial aid would need to be given at which points in the learning process and how to support students who are working hard but haven't yet mastered the material.

c) Pay for learning toward a degree acquired outside of traditional faculty and institutional boundaries.

While traditional faculty interaction will continue to play a critical role in the majority of institutions and programs, some innovative models don't use faculty in traditional ways (such as WGU's mentors), or don't use faculty at all. Carnegie Mellon's Open Learning Initiative (OLI) offers free, self-paced computer courses that are heavily informed by learning science. Students engage in interactive activities that promote learning; feedback loops and assessments are embedded in the program to diagnose problems, and, based on information gathered from tens of thousands of students, the program acts as a digital tutor, providing real-time support to help students during the learning process.

The results from this model are impressive. Tens of thousands of students have taken OLI courses and studies show that OLI students learn as much or more than students in the traditional courses while taking substantially less time to finish. This is in part because OLI diagnostic programs assess what students already know, so the learning experience is focused on what they don't know. This level of personalization is often difficult to find in traditional introductory-level courses, which tend to have large numbers of students per faculty member. An experimental site could allow students who are pursuing degrees to receive financial aid for high-quality classes that lack faculty interaction, like those offered by OLI.

Another area ripe for experimentation is an emerging movement in elite public and private institutions: Massively Open Online Courses, or MOOCs. These courses are designed by faculty at traditional universities, such as MIT, Stanford, and Harvard. [...] An experimental site could provide financial aid to assess and credit learning from these courses.

These are only a few examples of what could be done with experimental sites. There are many unknowns, which is why Congress gave the Department of Education authority to conduct experiments. The federal government should ask institutions to offer suggestions for experiments that would help higher education move from seat time to verifiable learning as well as guidelines that would ensure quality in these experiments [see sidebar, "Guidelines for Moving Beyond Seat Time"].

3) Innovate Free from the Credit Hour's History: Direct Assessment

The third tool the Department has at its disposal is the one created for, but never used by, the politically connected WGU: direct assessment. This little-known, never-before free used provision in the Higher Education Act allows financial aid to be made available to students in a program that

> *...in lieu of credit hours or clock hours as the measure of student learning, utilizes direct assessment of student learning...*[7]

Although this was created for WGU, it could be used by any college. So why don't institutions unhappy with the credit-hour definition just use direct assessment? Since direct assessment has never been used, there is little guidance around what it would or should look like, other than that institutions would need pre-approval from both the Department and their accreditor to be eligible.

Regulators should set a high bar for direct assessment, to avoid the grade inflation and weak academic standards endemic in the existing, time-based system. Taxpayers and students must be protected from unscrupulous operators with designs on billions of financial aid dollars. If crafted well, direct assessment could open space for high-performing, innovative institutions and accreditors to create a better model for how we measure and pay for learning. While the new credit-hour definition opens up many possibilities, it is linked to time in both name and history. Direct assessment is a blank slate. It could provide the opportunity to experiment with an alternate quality-assurance process, one that privileges learning over time and tradition. If a small, select, and forward-thinking set of institutions can develop different but valid ways of measuring learning, they could influence a much larger set of institutions and accreditors [see sidebar, "Guidelines for Moving Beyond Seat Time"].

It is likely that many established institutions would balk at this increased level of transparency and accountability if applied to their traditional time-based courses. And that's fine. Colleges would not have to use direct assessment and those that chose to use it wouldn't have to do so across the board. They could decide which (if any) programs they wanted to have approved for direct assessment. Those that choose to meet this high bar, however, could lead the field in creating new, valid, and reliable ways of establishing and measuring student learning outcomes.

While direct assessment has the most potential to radically change how the federal government pays for—and, therefore, how institutions measure—student learning, it should be approached with caution. The Department, institutions, and accreditors can learn a lot from opening up the credit hour and using carefully constructed experimental sites. The results of these ongoing experiments can inform and improve direct assessment to ensure that everyone understands what students are getting, in terms of both expectations and achievement.

Future Policy

If the federal government encourages institutions to move from seat time to learning by thoughtfully, carefully, and creatively using the credit hour, experimental sites, and direct assessment, the result should be innovations that produce improved student learning outcomes. If institutions are clear in determining what they want

Guidelines for Moving Beyond Seat Time

The Department should ask institutions and accreditors to provide input on guidelines broad enough to allow for innovation but stringent enough to prevent abuse. At a minimum, these guidelines should insist upon:

Externally Validated Learning Outcomes

Institutions and programs interested in moving beyond time-based measures should shift from the current practice of lone professors setting their own standards and measuring student performance against them. This is not to suggest that the federal government should set the standards—it shouldn't. But the standards must be validated by those who have a real stake in ensuring that the knowledge promised by passing a course actually means something. This could be done in any number of ways and involve various groups of experts, including faculty, disciplinary bodies, industry groups, or employers.

Transparent Learning Outcomes and Assessments

Different institutions and regions value different things, so learning outcomes should not be the same across the board. But everyone should know what students are getting. Institutions should make public, at a fairly granular level, what students in specific courses are expected to learn, and what they actually learn. This does not mean merely posting syllabi on the Internet. The competencies, validators, and assessments must be public, too. Graded student work (with the identities of the students shielded for privacy purposes), including papers, projects, and tests, should be made publicly available so that others can see how students are assessed against the set of learning outcomes.

students to know, what students already know, and how to credit what students do know, they can spend their time focusing on what students do not yet know. This could result in not just better outcomes, but faster and less expensive outcomes.

But while these three policy tools could be extremely valuable in accelerating the completion of meaningful, learning- based degrees, they have limits. No matter what eventually might be covered by these three federal policy tools, they only apply to accredited institutions, the only ones eligible for financial aid. This means that non-institutional providers of learning, no matter how good their outcomes, will remain ineligible. A biotech company could create a high-quality work-based training program whose "graduates" would best most students with an associate degree in science, but unless this training is attached to an accredited institution, the learning outcomes won't "count." A 15-year-old computer genius in her pajamas might develop a low-cost program that helps students master Calculus 101 in record time, but these outcomes—no matter how well documented—won't count toward a degree, either. If we accept that college-level learning can occur outside of traditional institutions, then why shouldn't we accept that college-level credit could be granted outside of traditional institutions? For now, the law is very clear on who can grant credit and who can receive federal financial aid: institutions and institutions only. Perhaps after a few rounds of experimentation with the credit hour, direct assessment, and experimental sites, policymakers will see value in awarding credit for learning, irrespective of how long it took, where it happened, or who provided it. The iterative process of experimentation around competency-based education will provide opportunities for congressional action, during the upcoming reauthorization of the Higher Education Act and beyond.

Endnotes

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