Leveraging Health Information Management Competency-based Education with a New Type of Learning Portal

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Abstract

The move to fully realize competency-based education and the use of open educational resources and their effect on learners brings about opportunities to revisit long-held assumptions about the entire higher education enterprise. In response, a new type of online portal and educational search engine is being developed as part of a US Department of Labor Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) grant and partnership between the American Health Information Management Association (AHIMA) and Lord Fairfax Community College. Promoting pathways in health information management and information technology, the portal provides online personalized learning plans tied to competencies using free or low-cost digital resources that allow students to earn credentials.

Keywords: competency-based education; competencies; direct assessment; portal; TAACCCT; open educational resources (OER); e-learning; Council for Excellence in Education; MOOCs; digital materials; online learning; distance education; apprenticeships; credentials

In 2014, the Council for Excellence in Education and the AHIMA Foundation worked to develop updated competency maps and curricula documents for associate, baccalaureate, and graduate degree programs in health information management (HIM). Through these documents, a shift was made to focus on competency-based education (CBE) rather than a didactic approach to instruction.

This shift was spurred by changes in the HIM labor market, where employers are seeking the technical and applied experiential knowledge needed for a meaningful career even in candidates for entry-level positions. Higher education must meet this demand for better evidence of learning, which not only emphasizes fundamental theories defining the profession of HIM but also requires student-centered, outcomes- and assessment-based programs focusing on relevant skills for future employment and career success.[1] The issues of a skills gap and lack of experiential training is particularly relevant in the HIM field. A 2014 Gallup/Lumina Foundation study found that 96 percent of academicians believed academic offerings were producing students with market-ready skills, while only 11 percent of employers felt that traditional models of education met their demands.[2] Similarly, AHIMA Foundation data have shown that graduates from HIM programs are likely to not have the necessary experience and skills training to meet employer needs in the HIM market.[3]

As CBE is disseminated and infused into HIM programs, much more is happening than a simple swap of the language of competencies for the vocabulary of course objectives and program learning outcomes. This shift invites us to think differently about how, when, where, why, and to whom HIM instruction is delivered now and how it will be delivered in the future. While course-based models for online learning

and classroom/lab instruction will remain important, the move to fully realize CBE and the use of open educational resources (OER) and their effect on learners brings about opportunities to revisit long-held assumptions about the entire higher education enterprise.

Faculty members universally agree that instructional materials have to be relevant, current, affordable, and timely. Because competencies are granular, a tidal wave of new content is possible in repositories of OER that include innumerable digital materials produced by faculty, employers, content creators, and educational technology vendors in a wide variety of formats, languages, and delivery modes. Where traditional programs relied on print and electronic textbook adoption to introduce or plan a curriculum, faculty-driven OER now include online lectures, simulations, and assessments that are cataloged and inventoried on the web and served as instruction using learning management systems (LMSs). Even this quick description of change is outdated, however, as the creation of new OER fails to keep pace with the emergence of new knowledge, industry needs for training and staff development, and Generation Z's use of social media and other web alternatives.

Lord Fairfax Community College (LFCC) is a regionally accredited institution in Virginia that is part of the 23-college Virginia Community College System and delivers several HIM programs. The college received a $3.25M US Department of Labor Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) grant in October 2014 to create Knowledge to Work, a program involving the development of direct-assessment CBE programs at the associate's degree and certificate levels in HIM, information technology, and administrative support technology. (See knowledgetowork.com for more information about the grant and programs.) In July 2015, LFCC was approved by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges to offer seven entirely direct-assessment CBE programs. The college is currently seeking authorization from the US Department of Education to offer Title IV financial aid for these programs.

LFCC's direct-assessment approach moves away from counting credit hours and required courses to attaining and verifying competencies. As a result, LFCC has become a CBE leader and is a proud member of the Competency-Based Educational Network (C-BEN) of early adopters. With the TAACCCT grant, LFCC has taken the competencies, personalized learning plans, and OER and made them available for free to all as part of a new learning ecosystem with an educational search engine and portal under the domain highered.org.

LFCC is working closely with the AHIMA Foundation to make HIM competencies and instructional materials available on the portal. The portal lets users search for free and low-cost educational resources that are mapped to competencies curated by faculty and digital librarians. A variety of filters such as cost, publication date, provider, rating, delivery mode, and alignment with specific competencies are available. A variety of learning materials are listed, ranging from OER with Creative Commons licensing to online courses, e-books, YouTube videos, iTunes content, internships, mentors, and massive open online courses (MOOCs).

The portal www.highered.org provides an overview of pathways in three industry areas: information technology, HIM, and administrative support technology, linking to relevant material and tools at sites such as AHIMA's Health Information Careers Map (www.hicareers.com/CareerMap/) and the US Department of Labor's CareerOneStop website (www.careeronestop.org) and Competency Model Clearinghouse (www.careeronestop.org/CompetencyModel/). CareerOneStop provides a suite of tools for exploring pathways, job information, training, credentials, and apprenticeship offerings, and the new portal does not duplicate this site. Rather, its unique niche is in providing an educational search engine and online personalized learning plans tied to competencies using free or low-cost digital resources through which users can earn a credential. Eventually, the portal will be expanded to other industries, pathways, and competency frameworks.

In addition to allowing basic and advanced searches of educational content, the portal lets users create a custom user profile of preferences and a personal landing page called MyHigherEd. After a profile is set up, users are able to develop a personalized learning plan that helps them identify and track new educational activities to gain competencies. The portal also assists them in documenting previously

attained competencies and monitoring progress with a custom dashboard. In future releases, users will have access to assessments and nationally recognized industry certifications. They will also be able to work toward badges for completing clusters of competencies and market their skills and learning artifacts through LinkedIn. For OER that require LMS hosting, the portal will provide low-cost access.

If desired, users may enroll in LFCC's direct-assessment CBE programs offered through Knowledge to Work. Enrollment gives them access to career coaches and faculty, assists them in getting financial aid, and provides them with a way to document competency attainment to earn stacked and latticed credentials, such as an accredited associate's degree and/or certificate. LFCC generates both traditional and extended, competency-driven transcripts for its direct-assessment CBE students.

The highered.org portal will also promote competency-based apprenticeships in the industry/program areas noted above, as well as those being developed as part of AHIMA's own Department of Labor apprenticeship grant: hospital coder, clinical documentation improvement specialist, business analyst, and data analyst. Links to apprenticeship sponsors, programs, and employers will be promoted.

Additional work being conducted under LFCC's TAACCCT grant and in partnership with AHIMA involves the creation of a new national competency framework and credentials related to information technology in HIM. AHIMA is now beginning the work of conducting a comprehensive job analysis and engaging employers and the community in developing a new competency framework and credential. Once complete, the job analysis will be available to help develop matching curricular materials and creation of a new national credentialing exam.

Stakeholders can become involved in the new portal in a number of ways. These opportunities include sharing OER, courses, and other materials for inclusion in search results and for use in learning plans, as well as opportunities for co-branding, marketing, and leveraging information about the user community for developing the profession. For more information, contact John Milam, PhD, executive director of LFCC's TAACCCT grant, at jmilam@lfcc.edu.

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Notes

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