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PROGRAM PLANNING AND DESIGN

Launching a Unique Competency-Based Offering at a Community College (Part 1)

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In an industry that has a tendency to get swept up by trends and fads, competency-based education (CBE) has proved its value time and again over a matter of decades. Over the past few years we've seen the number of CBE offerings skyrocket, matching the public's focus on student outcomes and skill mastery. In this two-part interview, John Milam reflects on the process of launching a unique CBE program that ties in open education resources (OER) at Lord Fairfax Community College (LFCC), and discuss what it takes to mainstream an innovative concept.

The EvoLLLution (Evo): Why are resources like HigherEd.org so important for today's students?

John Milam (JM): As students organize or curate their own learning, they pull together a lot of resources from many different places, such as social media, blogs, search engines, YouTube, Amazon, MOOCs, bootcamps, and course providers like Saylor Academy and Udemy. It takes time to find these resources and even longer to filter and evaluate them based on cost, delivery mode, publication date, and whether or not they're useful. Some things people find and want to go back to later. Others they're not quite ready for and some they want to download right away. The HigherEd.org portal does all of this for them in one place.

In addition to help finding resources, it's important to think of them in terms of competencies, information about the specific knowledge, skills and abilities that are learned. Search engines don't provide this. Most educational search engines are about admissions and finding colleges and programs. The repositories and search engines for open education

resources are mostly for faculty to incorporate them in their courses. But student learning takes place all the time at a much deeper and more personal level.

HigherEd.org gives users a search engine with customizable filters. It also gives them a kind of personal project management system for what they're learning. Wherever possible, resources in the portal are tied to national frameworks of competencies. We're also working to map these to national certifications and badges and eventually to military job codes, along with other ways to earn a credential. Of course, if someone wants an accredited degree or certificate, to work with and be engaged with faculty in the field, to get help from a career coaches, access to libraries and student services, and verification of previously attained competencies, they're welcome to take the next step and enroll in Lord Fairfax Community College's (LFCC) competency-based education (CBE) programs.

This kind of portal for learners hasn't existed until now. It's a reflection of how people are really learning and how they're using their smartphones and tablets. HigherEd.org is part of the new learning ecosystem which is emerging right now. Tools like this break apart the traditional delivery model of higher education and put students first—in control of what they want to learn and how they want to learn it. Tools like this have the potential to provide free and affordable higher education for all.

The portal isn't a substitute for regular and substantive interaction with faculty, which is a key design feature of direct-assessment CBE. But it provides all of the same instructional materials and potentially the

assessments and third-party industry-recognized occupational credentials that students in career and technical education (CTE) fields want.

Evo: What was the impetus behind launching the site?

JM: Like many community colleges, LFCC's first focus is on students. Our President, Cheryl Thompson-Stacy, has a strong vision for online learning and helping students learn anytime and anywhere, as well as in meeting workforce needs and getting students jobs in high-wage, high-growth industries.

The HigherEd.org portal and all that goes with it would never have been possible, though, without a U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) TAACCT grant which LFCC got in 2014, called Knowledge to Work. With this last round of TAACCT grants, DOL specifically encouraged institutions to offer CBE, utilize open educational resources (OER) to make college more affordable, and personalize learning to eliminate hurdles and increase completion. You can see this vision too in the White House and the U.S. Department of Education with initiatives such as the Learning Registry. We're also promoting competency frameworks for apprenticeships in health information management (HIM) as part of our partnership with the AHIMA Foundation, and anyone working towards four high-wage, high-growth job types in HIM can get the necessary competencies and OER through the portal.

With this TAACCT grant, LFCC created seven direct-assessment, CBE programs to earn associate's degrees and certificates in the areas of information technology, cyber security, networking, health information management, hospital facility coding, and administrative support technology. The HigherEd.org portal takes all of the open source software that was built to bring these CBE programs online and makes the same features available for free for everyone to use.

Evo: What were a few of the key roadblocks you had to overcome in making HigherEd.org a reality?

JM: Some specific roadblocks come to mind, including coming up to speed quickly on CBE, accreditation, financial aid, designing a model that would get both of these, and data and technology systems. Most importantly,

we had to have the approval of our regional accrediting agency before we could offer any direct-assessment CBE programs. This went a lot easier after we started getting to know other CBE schools in our regional accreditation area and becoming part of the Competency-Based Education Network (C-BEN).

Based on what we learned, we designed our programs specifically to address the regulations and expectations of the Department of Education and our accreditor SACSCOC. It took a while to digest the Dear Colleague letters, results of ongoing investigations by ED's Office of Inspector General, and the emerging Experimental Sites Initiative guidelines. But once we came up to speed our programs have moved forward. C-BEN introduced us to the work of IMS Global, a collaborative focused on ed-tech and learning technologies, and we were able to be part of the CBE record data workgroup and the extended CBE transcript workgroup. We adhered to IMS and Common Education Data Standard (CEDS) standards in developing the portal, software for our CBE programs, and our extended CBE transcript.

We also work closely with SACSCOC leaders, who have provided a lot of insight. We're just finishing a response to SACSCOC's on-site visiting committee that looked at our direct-assessment CBE programs. We're the first institution to be approved for programs with 100-percent direct assessment and the first to have a site visit.

We filed a request with the DOE last August for approval to offer Title IV financial aid and went through three rounds of documentation and Q&A. Now they're apparently waiting on final SACSCOC approval from the site visit and our follow up response to SACSCOC is due the end of this month. Then, sometime after the SACSCOC board meets in December, if our response is accepted, we're hopeful that we'll then get Title IV aid approval for direct assessment. So far, no community college has been approved to do this and very few institutions have been approved at all. We believe we've done everything we know to do to get approval.

Meanwhile, we built open-source software for tracking competencies, creating and monitoring personalized learning plans, providing case management for CBE students, and creating an extended CBE transcript that lists competencies and their course credit equivalents. There really

wasn't any software we could buy from the SIS and LMS vendors at the time and very little even now. So we built our own and were incredibly fortunate to get the right team of database and programming gurus in place, as well as an incredibly bright and energetic digital librarian and other staff to do requirements gathering, create wireframes, develop a responsive design and mobile website, and write content. We're using the open source tools PHP, MySQL, and Linux and will make the software available in DOL's repository Skills Commons. The faculty involved in the programs and their deans over time, the vice president for academic and student affairs, and other LFCC staff from procurement to IT to HR all pitched in, all with incredible support and encouragement from our president.

In some ways, we've been at the right place at the right time in terms of support mechanisms and accrediting agencies willingness to look at direct assessment CBE as a new way to ensure student success. Everything has taken a great deal of time to build and put in place, but it's there.

This is the first installment in a two-part Q&A series by John Milam. In the conclusion, they share their thoughts on HigherEd.org's place in the market.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Community colleges need to do more to capitalize on the desire of today's students to curate their own learning experiences.

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The approval, accreditation and Title IV eligibility processes for innovative programs is incredibly rigorous.

The EvoLLLution is an online newspaper dedicated to non-traditional higher education. It is the brainchild of [Destiny Solutions](#), a company that enables postsecondary institutions to deliver world-class customer service, grow enrollments and capture new markets while increasing operational efficiency.

Knowledge to Work (K2W):

A Portal for Competencies and Individualized Learning

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KnowledgeToWork.com

HigherEd.org

LFCC.edu



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