Re-envisioning Student Learning in a Digital Age

Definition, delivery, and certification.

By Paul Gordon Brown

“Wake up, David! Class is over.” David slept through an entire class, again. The instructor, rather than being angry, is sympathetically upset. David is bright, but his passion for technical theater pushes him to seek his education outside of the academy, where a hands-on education seems more relevant. He sleeps through classes and does not engage in on-campus activities because he is working in nearby theaters late into the night. When David needs to further his skills and knowledge, he accesses high-quality educational resources online to fill in the gaps; entire courses, syllabi, and lectures provided by world-renowned professors are available at the click of his mouse. David transfers into and leaves a number of universities but ultimately determines he must finish his degree. When he at last returns, however, David finds himself sitting in classes far beneath his abilities just to fulfill the required seat time. His theater professors even ask him to teach entire class units, realizing his skills surpass theirs. David is only four credit hours shy of a degree, but because not all of his courses transfer he must take additional classes to meet the requirements of his new university. David finishes his degree, but it is in spite of the system. College student educators should ask themselves: how can students like David be better served? How does the system alienate students from achieving their educational goals when it should be enabling them?

David’s story is not new or unique. In fact, with recent technological advances, it may even be increasingly more common. The growth of open educational resources, massive open online courses (MOOCs), and other online education projects is enabling anyone to engage in high-quality educational experiences outside of the walled gardens of higher education. These new ways of building one’s own education are similar to higher education’s competitors of the past, but they are rapidly expanding their reach and enabling new forms of education. In her 2010 work, DIY U: Edupunks, Edupreneurs, and the Coming Transformation of Higher Education, Anya Kamenetz provides a sketch of this “new breed” of student. These students are “unbundling” their educational experiences from the university and developing their own personal learning networks that span physical and virtual contexts. This phenomenon, although it may be accelerating, is not new. If higher education is to stay relevant, it must adapt how it defines, delivers, and certifies student learning. This project must also extend outside of the traditional course, classroom, and residence hall and requires the support not only of the faculty, but also of student affairs professionals.

Students like David find themselves at odds with many of the modernist practices in higher education that were developed nearly a century ago. Many of these were patterned after the efficiencies of an industrial model that no longer holds the same relevance in the information age. The college “credit hour” is a prototypical example of an outdated practice that continues to hinder educational reform. Standard units,
which were eventually replicated as the “credit hour” in higher education, were measurements of student seat time in the classroom. These credit hours, however, were never intended to serve as a measure of student learning, although they eventually became a proxy for it.

In a 2003 New Directions for Higher Education monograph, editors Jane V. Wellman and Thomas Ehrlich outline the history of the credit hour and present research on how it became entrenched in higher education practice through both government and institutional policies. Additionally, the monograph reveals how the credit hour is inconsistently deployed across the decentralized landscape of American higher education. In a 2012 report for the New America Foundation, Amy Laitinen provides data on how this outdated system of seat time qua student learning is becoming increasingly irrelevant given the new means of educational content delivery, the new skills required of information workers, and the diversity of students’ life experiences. Current students, like David, may find that these artifacts of the past act as barriers to educational attainment, rather than enablers.

Barriers to change occur in the co-curriculum as well as the curriculum. While the credit hour certifies classroom success in terms of seat time, attendance figures and student satisfaction often act as stand-ins for measuring student learning in co-curricular programs. Even the concept of the “program” itself, often a group event, taking place at a specific time and location, may be a barrier. Although student affairs professionals often consider themselves to be the purveyors of education “outside of the classroom,” they nevertheless may fall prey to some of the same outdated concepts as their academic affairs colleagues. Unfortunately, this is often to the detriment of students like David.

Student seat time, attendance figures, and measures of student satisfaction are unable to adequately measure student learning in meaningful ways. The inability to measure student learning is becoming an untenable position in an increasingly competitive and market-driven landscape of higher education. In the past, colleges and universities accommodated students like David through a patchwork of programs and generalist degrees, awarding college credit for work experience. These “stopgap” measures, however, are being challenged by globalization, the rise of private for-profit institutions and the increasing availability and effectiveness of online education. As educational boundaries become blurrier, the line between learning taking place within the walls of the classroom and outside of it must also blur. If our definition of a college education becomes unbounded and unbundled, our method of defining it, delivering it, and certifying it must change. In a world in which skills and competencies can be gained in many different contexts outside of the academy, one must ask what is the role of higher education in advancing student learning?

Changes impacting higher education present threats to traditional practices, but also provide institutions and college student educators the opportunity to re-envision their role in the learning process. Institutions can expand the reach of the services and opportunities they provide, faculty can be freed from the constraints of traditional educational practices, and student affairs educators can focus on teaching students valuable certifiable life skills. In order to achieve this, three elements must be in place: (1) a universally defined and measurable set of student learning outcomes and competencies, (2) a more robust method for the intentional delivery of learning opportunities to students, and (3) a portable certification system. Some of these reforms are already beginning to take place.
In defining a universal set of student learning outcomes and competencies, the Lumina Foundation developed the Degree Qualifications Profile in 2011, a document that identifies outcomes and benchmarks for college degrees. This document is being explored as a basis for developing competency-based degree programs. In student affairs, organizations such as the Council for the Advancement of Standards, ACPA—College Student Educators International, and NASPA—Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education work toward helping institutions develop quantifiable and assessable student learning outcomes. Although there is still work to be done in this area, many foundational documents, such as Student Learning Imperative and Learning Reconsidered, guide the way to defining a universal set of standards crossing all functional areas and learning opportunities available to students.

The second element that must fall into place is a more robust delivery mechanism for enacting and delivering these educational opportunities. Colleges and universities are experimenting with hybrid classroom and online environments and with the aforementioned initiatives, such as MOOCs and open educational resources. As these systems become more sophisticated and best practices emerge, they have the potential to transform the way higher education is delivered. In student affairs contexts, a 2006 About Campus article by authors Kathleen G. Kerr and James Tweedy provides a sketch for the development of a more robust system of educational delivery. This proposed “curricular” framework, which is being further developed by ACPA’s Residential Curriculum Institute, calls on institutions to develop educational opportunities grounded in theory and based on their institutional missions and a defined set of cascading and sequenced learning outcomes. Although this framework was initiated in residence life settings, it nevertheless provides guidelines that can be expanded across entire institutions.

The last remaining element is to work toward a new method of certification for student learning. In December 2012, the originator of the credit hour, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, announced that it received funding to explore the credit hour’s replacement. Additionally, the MacArthur Foundation is supporting efforts to create competency-based degree programs and open, portable, digital badge certifications for knowledge and skills. In student affairs, some institutions have experimented with individualized co-curricular transcript and certificate programs, particularly in the area of student leadership.

At the beginning of this article, our student, David, encountered a university that impeded rather than enabled his educational success. As higher education adapts to accommodate new means of acquiring knowledge, skills, and competencies, however, colleges and universities have the ability, and responsibility, to help students like David achieve an education that is more well rounded, relevant, and delivered in a way that enhances success rather than hindering it. In order to best serve students like David, college student educators must participate and lead in the creation of a new system for defining, delivering, and certifying student learning. In so doing, we have the ability to not only serve the “Davids” in our institutions better, but also engage them more fully in the learning opportunities provided on campus. As our students change, so must we.

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