

NOW is the Time to Raise the Bar for Student Success

HOW PROFESSIONAL COLLEGES & UNIVERSITIES CAN USE THE POWER OF DISRUPTIVE INNOVATION TO DRIVE CHANGE



As Agents of Change, Professional and Career Colleges Have a Unique Opportunity to Set Higher Standards for Student Success

For more than a decade, for-profit colleges and universities have been agents of educational change—driving innovation by promoting online learning as an alternative to traditional classroom instruction. Now it's time for these institutions to use their years of experience as leaders on the online learning front lines to shape what must come next for higher education: increased student success.

A confluence of economic and political factors has made student success today's No. 1 priority for higher-education institutions. It was once possible—even likely—for an American worker with a high school degree to go to work in a factory, prove himself on the manufacturing line, rise through the ranks and retire 40 years later from the very same company.

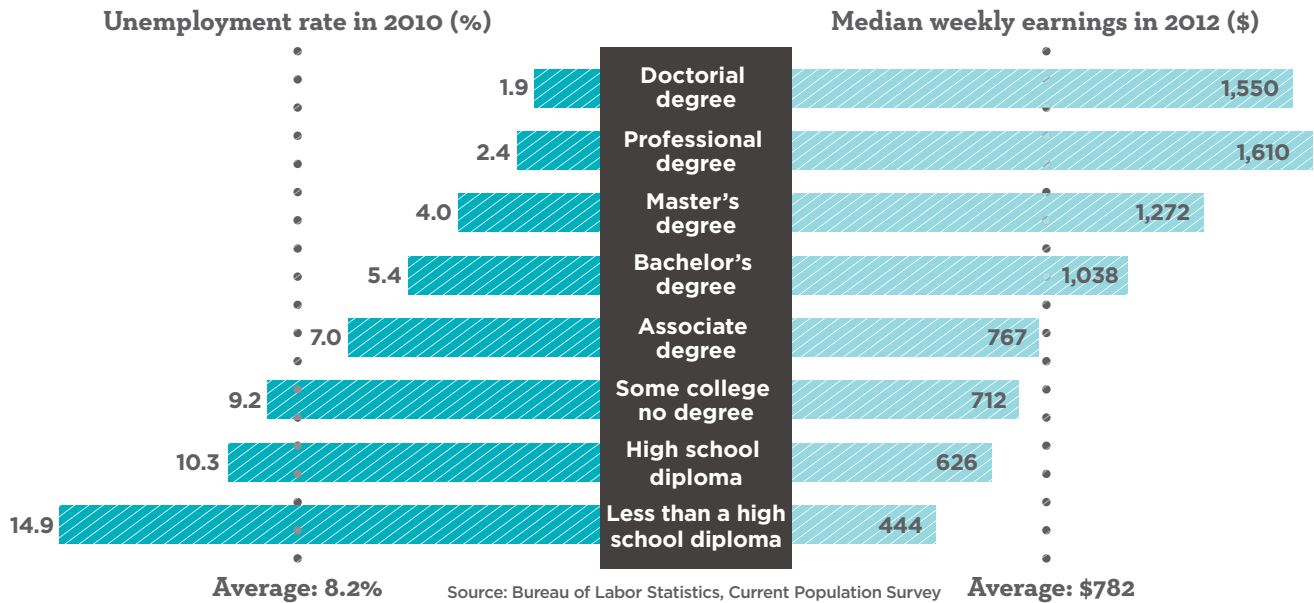
As our economy has shifted from labor-based manufacturing to skills-based services, that scenario has changed dramatically. Now employers want workers to have college degrees—and often coursework beyond that initial

degree—for almost any job. During the recession, this became readily apparent: It is the workers without college degrees who face the highest rates of unemployment, according to the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics. Americans need college degrees to succeed in the workforce, which means they first must succeed as students.

In addition, the push for greater student success is being driven by politicians' and regulators' heightened scrutiny of career colleges, which have—to some degree—been victims of their own success. Professional college and university enrollment has boomed, especially during the recession, and that has drawn the attention of policymakers who note that many of these students pay for at least some of their education through government grants and federally backed student loans.

With this scrutiny comes criticism—about graduation rates, job placements and loan defaults among students in career colleges. For some career colleges, the criticism has been warranted. Other good actors have suffered from guilt by association. Regardless, the industry-wide effect is the same: For-profit colleges and universities are under fire.

Education pays:



Innovative approaches yield student success

But crisis breeds opportunity. A study from Harvard Business School Professor Clayton Christensen and other researchers makes the case that the same kind of “disruptive innovation” that fueled the online learning movement now should be applied to creating achievement-oriented higher-education policies that tie a student’s rise through an educational institution to competency and mastery of well-defined critical skills.

“This emerging disruptive innovation... allows for an escape from the policies that focus on credit hours and seat time,” states the 2011 study from educational research institute The Center for American Progress and educational think tank The Innosight Institute, which was cofounded by Christensen. “Outcomes will be a more appropriate measure for judging students and institutions.”

To best ensure those outcomes are successful ones for students, professional and career colleges must strengthen their policies and practices by moving toward competency-based learning outcomes; increasing rigor around course development; and imbuing coursework with the professional skills students need to thrive in their studies and beyond.



Case Study

Western Governors University

Focusing on competency, not credit hours

Western Governors University is among online learning institutions getting it right, the study authors contend, by awarding degrees “based on competency, rather than because students sat through a certain number of hours of classes and did not fail. Students are therefore able to move at their own pace, and instead of being charged by the credit hour, they are charged a flat rate for a six-month term. The student progresses when he or she demonstrates mastery of a skill or a set of knowledge.”

Western Governors “shows that online learning offers a natural medium to move toward focusing on competency-based measures around what one is actually able to do, about which employers and society at large are actually concerned,” according to the study, whose authors see a compounding effect to adopting this competency-based methodology.

“Shifting toward recognizing mastery of specific competencies where time is variable could even open up a path toward the recognition of lifelong learning, whereby people accumulate expertise over time through both formal and informal means,” the study states. “There are ways to measure that such that employers—in the governmental, not-for-profit, and for-profit realms—can see that a given prospective employee possesses the skill set to do what needs doing.”

Case Study Capella University

Adding rigor to the course-building process

Capella University also has seized the opportunity to raise the bar for student success through a competency-based strategy for boosting learning. Capella's model requires rigor in the course-building process to ensure every learner has the opportunity for an outstanding educational experience.

"We assess students based on specified learning outcomes, and we use a centralized course-development process so we're able to hold to our standards," says Chris Janzen, Capella University's Director of Course Design and Development. "We don't start with the content. We start with the learning outcome and work backward to the appropriate content."

It's a unique course-development system designed for a unique population of learners, says Rosann Cahill, a product manager in Capella's Next-Generation Learning division. "At Capella, choosing content is not an instructor activity. It is an instructional design activity. We work with faculty members to come up with relevant and engaging content that can meet our standards and meet the needs of all of our students."

Here's how Capella's course-development system works. Using the competency-based standards for each course, course developers outline what students need to learn to gain proficiency. They work with faculty to select and shape appropriate content. That content then must pass muster with Capella's quality-assurance team. Finally, the course requirements and content are built into online learning modules available to students.

This kind of rigor around course development is a cornerstone of Quality Matters, a nonprofit organization that has emerged as a nationally recognized leader in helping educational institutions instill rigor into their online learning programs. Quality Matters has developed the QM Rubric, a set of standards used to evaluate the design of online courses in areas such as learning objectives, assessment and learner engagement. The QM Rubric includes a scoring system that allows for standard evaluation across traditional and non-traditional education delivery models.

A RUBRIC FOR GETTING COURSE DEVELOPMENT RIGHT

Quality Matters' QM Rubric is designed to promote and evaluate standards in online education in the following areas:

- ▶ **Course Overview and Introduction:** Introduces students to the purpose of the course and to its components, as well as to the instructor and other students
- ▶ **Learning Objectives:** Describes required, measurable outcomes
- ▶ **Assessment and Measurement:** Explains learning objectives and aligns them with course activities and resources
- ▶ **Resources and Materials:** Ensures instructional materials have sufficient breadth, depth and currency to facilitate learning
- ▶ **Learner Engagement:** Ensures activities promote achievement of the stated objectives and defines requirements for student interaction
- ▶ **Course Technology:** Considers whether tools and media support learning objectives and can deliver content for the course
- ▶ **Learner Support:** Describes technical, academic and institutional support services offered to students
- ▶ **Accessibility:** Incorporates Americans with Disabilities Act standards and any additional institutional policies regarding accessibility

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Integrating professionalism into coursework

Professional and career colleges have a unique ability to bridge the gap between what students *know* and what they *know how* to do when they graduate. For example, to thrive at work, a recent graduate in accounting will not only need to be able to assess a client's finances, but also communicate the information effectively to management.

Any higher-education institution should integrate professional "soft" skills and activities into online courses from the first day a student logs on, says Ronnie Kramer, an online education expert and consultant with Blackboard. In this regard, Kramer says, professional colleges and universities have a particular advantage because they already are laser focused on preparing students for the workplace.

The goal should be to transfer experience while also creating knowledge, so students know how to contribute to a team project, problem-solve, communicate effectively, write persuasively, think critically and manage time well—all skills essential in a professional environment. Career colleges should build into courses meaningful, "action-learning" activities designed to develop such professionalism.

Students imbued with these skills will be successful on campus and in the workplace, Kramer says. "They will graduate feeling the value of their education."

Conclusion

Professional colleges and universities have proven themselves to be effective agents of change in the past. Now, these institutions must continue to use the power of disruptive innovation to focus on increased student success. They must influence other types of institutions to move toward competency-based learning outcomes; increase rigor around course development; and integrate professional skills into coursework so that students can thrive in their studies and their careers.

