

THE LAWLOR REVIEW

A Periodic Review of Ideas and Issues in Education Marketing

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VOLUME XXIV • NUMBER 1
Spring 2016

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POSTMASTER:
Please send address changes to: *The Lawlor Review*, 6400 Flying Cloud Drive, Suite 170, Eden Prairie, MN 55344.

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Letter from the Editor

Last fall, The Lawlor Group conducted a readership survey for *The Lawlor Review*. Nearing its 25th anniversary of publication, *The Lawlor Review* has an established reputation for delivering long-form articles that blend strategic and industry-wide perspectives with best-practice tactics to address emerging issues in the higher education marketplace.

But as a marketing firm, we know that even strong brands evolve over time to reflect the environment in which they exist and the needs of core constituencies—and if brands fail to evolve, then they risk becoming irrelevant. Thus, inherent to successfully managing a brand identity is the ongoing act of evaluating it and then making changes as warranted.

So we asked our readers what was and wasn't working for them about *The Lawlor Review*, and here's what we learned:

- An overwhelming majority feel its long-form journalism gives *The Lawlor Review* both its distinction and its value.
- At the same time, many respondents pointed out that it would be helpful for us to deliver some of *The Lawlor Review's* content in ways that take less time to digest.
- Readers also appreciate when articles draw upon the insights and practices of their peers at other institutions and urge us to continue expanding that range of voices.

So our response is to include more graphics, provide takeaway summaries, and preview the sources we quote. And while we will continue to interview nationally prominent outside experts who can apply the current trends in their fields to higher education marketing, instead of as a stand-alone long-form interview in *The Lawlor Review*, look for that content in the form of guest posts to our Smarketplace blog, briefer Q&A's, and podcasts and videos on our website. The "Insights" page at thelawlorgroup.com aggregates those items plus our monthly *Lawlor Focus* articles, annual *Trends* analyses, and occasional whitepapers.

In this issue of *The Lawlor Review*, our writer Tom Brandes addresses a challenge that almost all enrollment operations face: staff attrition in the admissions office. He consults a number of practitioners in the field to learn what's effective for retaining top talent. In the center spread, I provide an annotated guide to the data that College Scorecard draws upon and the caveats that should be known about it. Then our own director of digital strategy, Brendan Mayer, examines the future of competency-based education specifically in the context of a liberal arts education.

As always, we hope *The Lawlor Review* provides you with timely and relevant marketplace intelligence that inspires and informs intelligent solutions. Thank you for reading!

AMY FOSTER
Editor

Entry-level admissions counselors arguably play the most vital role in connecting with potential students, projecting the institution's strengths and value, and helping to facilitate families' crucial buying decision. But retaining the most skilled among them can be a challenge given their long hours, grueling travel demands, and (all-too-often) low pay. And when they go, the intellectual capital of their marketplace knowledge and established relationships goes with them. So what can be done to retain top talent?

THE OTHER RETENTION: KEEPING ADMISSIONS STAFF ON BOARD

by Tom Brandes

Talk with seasoned admissions professionals and many will tell you that what started out as something to do for a couple of years (say, until going to grad school or figuring out what they *really* wanted to do) has turned into a rich and rewarding career. After all, being in a position to make a difference in students' lives at a pivotal and stressful moment is immensely gratifying.

But retaining entry-level admissions counselors is an ongoing difficulty at most institutions. Many of these younger staff members leave after a year—creating problems for their departments that go beyond simply hiring and training a replacement. Among myriad reasons continuity in an admissions staff is important, there's the risk that if high school counselors don't know whom to talk with, then they may stop referring students to the college.

Fortunately, among admissions counselors who stay on for two or three recruitment cycles, many come to see

this as a lifelong profession. How did they stay focused long enough to get past the initial hurdles and see the bigger picture of important, meaningful work? Interviews with admissions professionals spanning the associate, director, dean, and vice president levels help shed some light on what can be done better in order to retain talent and intellectual capital at various steps of the career ladder.

An Accidental Profession

In some ways the experience of DeVone Eurales, associate director of admission at Knox College (Illinois), is typical of many people in admissions. He began working in the admissions office as an undergrad and accepted a job there right after graduation, thinking he would stay for a year or two. But after 11 years, he's in it for the long haul.

Not coincidentally, Eurales had a great admissions counselor when he was a student. If he called her, she'd call him back; when he needed help, she helped him. He and his family trusted her, and he still has birthday and Christmas cards she sent him 15 years ago.

PRACTITIONER VOICES IN THIS ARTICLE



DeVone Eurales
Associate Director of Admission
Knox College



Melissa Falk
Associate Dean of Admission
and Financial Aid
Muhlenberg College



Carlos Jimenez
Director of Admission for
Outreach Recruitment
Colorado College



Pete Littlefield
Director of Undergraduate
Admissions
Saint Leo University



Eric Nichols
Vice President for Enrollment
and Dean of Admission
Saint Anselm College



Sally Richmond
Vice President for Admission
and Financial Aid
Washington and Lee University

Eurales has that same desire to make a difference for the students he works with, yet he says, “I think we’ve all been tempted at some point to leave college admissions. I grew up in a poverty-stricken area and had friends who didn’t make it to college, so I’ve thought about becoming a high school counselor or working with a community-based organization to help students navigate the process.”

But he has stayed in admissions because he continues to have fun, be challenged, and learn every day. For instance, “changes in technology and how students want you to communicate with them give you different ways to be versatile in your job,” says Eurales. He notes that because students now access information about colleges on their smartphones, admissions departments need tech-savvy people who are comfortable posting content to social

media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Snapchat.

Evolving Job Requirements

Pete Littlefield, director of undergraduate admissions at Saint Leo University (Florida), agrees that one of the keys to job satisfaction in the admissions field is to never stop learning. “Ask questions, read widely from relevant publications, learn from colleagues and industry experts, and use new technology to engage with students,” he advises younger admissions staffers.

Unlike many, Littlefield went into admissions work as his first choice for a job after graduation. He started off giving campus tours as an undergraduate and has been involved with admissions ever since, reaching the director level five years ago.

Over the years, Littlefield has seen the admissions process evolve

from “seasons” of traveling, reading applications, counseling about financial aid, and staving off summer melt to a steady onslaught of recruiting consecutive classes simultaneously as the number of high school graduates in some regions has declined. So not everyone is up to the task.

“Many people working in admissions have been tempted to leave at some point,” says Littlefield. “It isn’t like working at Google or another place with phenomenal work/life balance. In fact, it’s not the most stable profession, because you’re depending on the decision-making prowess of 18-year-olds.”

Stretched Thin

The ever-expanding list of duties for admissions officers can also take its toll.

Melissa Falk, associate dean of admission and financial aid at Muhlenberg College (Pennsylvania),

BEST PRACTICES FOR RETAINING ADMISSIONS TALENT

by Tom Brandes

The consensus among admissions and enrollment professionals is that when institutions can incorporate these practices for their admissions teams, it increases the likelihood of retaining the best staff members.

Pay them what they deserve. As the economy continues to improve, Sally Richmond, vice president for admission and financial aid at Washington and Lee University (Virginia), finds it more challenging to fill positions with entry-level salaries, which are on par with salaries for an assistant coach at the Division III level.

“Young staffers frequently leave the institution because of low pay for long hours,” observes Pete Littlefield, director of undergraduate admissions at Saint Leo University (Florida).

Or they stay at the institution but leave the profession. Littlefield has noticed admissions staff moving into the development or alumni relations department, where they

can be paid more and leverage their connections among former prospects who are now graduates.

Recognize good work. Acknowledgement for going above and beyond helps staff feel valued. “Public recognition of their accomplishments is important,” says Carlos Jimenez, director of admission for outreach recruitment at Colorado College (Colorado).

Other non-compensation recognition could take the form of, for instance, a random day off, suggests DeVone Eurales, associate director of admission at Knox College (Illinois).

Identify paths for advancement. “To keep good people in admissions, college administrators need to get them thinking about admissions as a profession and not just a two-year job,” says Melissa Falk, associate dean of admission and financial aid at Muhlenberg College (Pennsylvania).

believes that too often entry-level staff members are being asked to do way too much and are paid way too little for it. Because they're asked to run really hard and fast for sustained periods of time, they often see working in admissions as a stepping stone on the way to something better.

Falk thinks a smarter approach is to recognize that young professionals are akin to customers in the old truism that it costs more to find new customers than to retain the ones you already have. She appreciates working in an admissions department with unusual staff longevity: She has completed 23 recruiting cycles, her dean 28, and the director of financial aid 32 cycles.

A Muhlenberg grad herself, Falk always wanted to change the world and do something she cared deeply about. As a student she was a campus

tour guide, an upper class advisor, and a mentor to freshmen, and she enjoyed checking in at the admissions office every week for 15 minutes before giving tours.

After graduation, Falk temped in New York in the computer industry ... and hated it. Within a few months, she quit, moved back to Allentown, and told the Muhlenberg admissions staff they needed to find a job for her.

"I wanted to give voice to students who could only speak through their file, and I knew that role would be nurtured here," recalls Falk. "I was hired as a part-time admissions counselor and worked in financial aid the first year, yet I was so convinced I was meant to do this. Today, I can't see myself doing anything else."

Falk has immense opportunities for growth at Muhlenberg, which also helps explain why she's still working

in admissions. She has advised a class as well as clubs on campus, and she is connected to student life in other ways so she is able to contribute to students' experiences.

But mostly, she loves being part of the big decisions when the college takes a chance on some students. "To see the transformative experience for them is powerful," she says. "It's amazing that we can change the direction of a life."

Similarly, she notes that seeing younger admissions staff members evolve and grow personally and professionally is very rewarding, and she feels fortunate to mentor them.

Pathways for Advancement

Carlos Jimenez, director of admission for outreach recruitment at Colorado College (Colorado), picks up on this point about mentoring,

Otherwise, there are more obvious opportunities outside of admissions. "I've seen people leave admissions to go back to school, to go to the high school side of the desk, and to work for consulting firms and other higher education service providers," notes Eric Nichols, vice president for enrollment and dean of admission at Saint Anselm College (New Hampshire). He thinks that's why college administrators need to create clear pathways to move up in admissions.

Encourage personal fulfillment and work/life balance. "Show them how they can impact the college on a bigger, broader level," advises Falk. "They don't have to leave to feel fulfilled."

Nichols notes that people can land in admissions spots that provide additional opportunities beyond recruitment travel and reading applications. "I'd encourage younger staff members to volunteer to take on special responsibilities, like working with transfer students, international students, or athletic admissions," he advises.

Littlefield similarly points out a growing trend toward the use of regional admissions representatives who live in primary recruiting regions outside an institution's home state—particularly in Chicago, California's Bay Area, Southern California, and Texas. For the college, this arrangement allows immediate outreach on a greater scale and reduces travel time and expense. And for the staff member, it can help with work/life balance.

"Work/life balance is important," stresses Eurales. "Counselors have to understand how to set aside time for themselves, so they can enjoy the job but not make it their entire life."

Be intentional about mentoring. "Administrators need to be supportive and offer helpful feedback to younger staff," advises Richmond. The mentoring relationship can connect them to a sense of community, adds Jimenez: "That builds camaraderie and connections so people stay in the profession longer." ■

since he senses that many directors and associate directors don't do enough to mentor young talent during their first two years.

Jimenez believes anything beyond the entry level of admissions is a challenging area to break into, since it's actually very competitive to move up to the associate director level. He'd like to show young professionals, particularly those from underrepresented populations, there's a way to stay and grow into the profession.

"Sixty-hour work weeks, high-pressure work environments, and heavy travel schedules lead to turnover," notes Jimenez. "While turnover brings new energy and can change the office dynamics and status quo for the positive, overall the challenges of it outweigh the benefits."

Now in his 12th year in admissions, Jimenez himself considered leaving for graduate school, law school, or policy work, but decided he wanted to be more directly involved with students. He strongly believes it's highly important work and feels he can make a difference in students' lives by diffusing some of the pressure inherent in the admissions process.

Among the rewards of working in admissions, he counts seeing students from the inner city come to Colorado College, grow, and do great things; the personal and professional relationships he's enjoyed with people in the field; and even the travel aspects of his job. (Growing up, his family took only driving-distance trips and visited relatives, not vacation destinations. Now he gets to visit all 50 states and go on some international trips—things he never thought he'd be able to do.)

Still, he recognizes the many challenges for those at the entry level

who are working long hours, traveling constantly, and reading tons of applications while trying to maintain a good sense of work/life balance and keep the work from becoming all-consuming.

“Sixty-hour work weeks, high-pressure work environments, and heavy travel schedules lead to turnover. While turnover brings new energy and can change the office dynamics and status quo for the positive, overall the challenges of it outweigh the benefits.”

Carlos Jimenez

Director of Admission for Outreach Recruitment at Colorado College

Sticking With It

"Get two years of admissions work under your belt, and you can do it for life."

That's what Eric Nichols, vice president for enrollment and dean of admission at Saint Anselm College (New Hampshire), tells people. First-year admissions counselors are often overwhelmed by the time demands of the job, so he urges them to give it two years.

Nichols didn't start in admissions until a couple of years after graduating from college. He received an internship from his alma mater, Stonehill College (Massachusetts), to join its effort in helping bridge the gap for first-generation college students.

"I was a low-income, first-generation college student, and I wouldn't have been able to afford college, but Stonehill

took a chance on me. Now I get to provide opportunities to students like me," says Nichols.

While helping students is a constant and critical role, as admissions professionals move up the ranks, their responsibilities to the institution expand to become just as important. There's always pressure to enroll a class within the budget—and always a wish to do better next time. Because it's impossible to please everyone even when enrollment targets are hit, Nichols believes a thick skin is helpful for those in admissions. Yet he enjoys the work precisely because it's not easy.

"Admissions work is like putting a puzzle together," he says. "Each year you have new pieces to work with and a new puzzle (aka, a freshman class) to build. I enjoy the challenge, and it's rewarding to build a class in the competitive environment of New England higher education."

Expanding Opportunity

Sally Richmond, vice president for admission and financial aid at Washington and Lee University (Virginia), agrees that enrollment management is the hot seat on campus. She's been working in the admissions field for 21 years and—having been a political science major—feels her ability to employ diplomacy has helped her advance in her career and take on new responsibilities.

One of Richmond's hopes is that people in the profession will be more open to different pathways into the field. She points out, "Just as we need to remove barriers to access for students into colleges, we also need to allow people with different backgrounds into admissions."

In that vein, Richmond sees a sweet spot between turnover and retention among admissions staff. She believes it's good to have a range of experience and that an office would become stale without turnover. Yet she thinks it's the middle ranks—particularly, assistant directors or deans—that get squeezed.

Aside from working three years as a high school counselor, Richmond herself has stayed in admissions because it's never boring, and mentors have afforded her incredible opportunities. She enjoys the vibrant and diverse qualities of the greater admissions community, where she has lifelong friendships and colleagues.

Reaching the Top

Indeed, it's never boring in admissions! Tom Kepple, president emeritus of Juniata College (Pennsylvania), thinks higher education institutions are facing more enrollment-related challenges (such as right-sizing

the institution, ensuring affordability, and dealing with public perceptions about value) than perhaps any time in the last 40 years.

Kepple now leads the American Academic Leadership Institute, which sponsors the Senior Leadership Academy to help those at or near the dean level move into vice-presidential or cabinet-level positions. Among the biggest challenges at that level is the need to see the institution's priorities as the number one concern, compared to a more narrow departmental view.

People are nominated for the Senior Leadership Academy by their college president. Kepple has noticed that presidents care about retaining talent on the admissions staff because, as he puts it, "There's a lot of churn at the bottom of the admissions pyramid."

But at the same time, presidents recognize the need to help people get to the top level of enrollment management. So the Senior Leadership

Academy broadens attendees' exposure to the workings of an entire institution, and Kepple has seen that those who come from admissions are quite often already viewed as leaders.

Leading a Shared Effort

At institutions where most revenue comes from tuition, enrollment issues are most likely already at the forefront of the cabinet's attention. But it does require leadership to help a campus community realize that "it takes a village" to recruit a class.

Connecting with potential students and giving them a sense of the college's value proposition—it's the job of admissions counselors, but not *only* admissions counselors. When the institution can retain talent, skills, and intellectual capital throughout all of the admissions office's ranks, it cultivates leaders who are able to marshal the entire campus community to help bring in a class. ■

If They Don't Know What
You Value, How Will They
Determine Your Value?

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A LOOK INSIDE THE COLLEGE SCORECARD'S DATA

by Amy Foster

The U.S. Department of Education's online college comparison tool, College Scorecard, was overhauled last fall to provide "a truer picture on college cost and value" using "reliable and unbiased information about college performance" so that families can "better understand the consequences and tradeoffs of their choices" via access to "never-before-released national data about post-college outcomes." Yet the department noted "some important limitations in the data that should be kept in mind in their use." Here are the most significant caveats that college representatives should be prepared to discuss with families.

www.collegescorecard.ed.gov

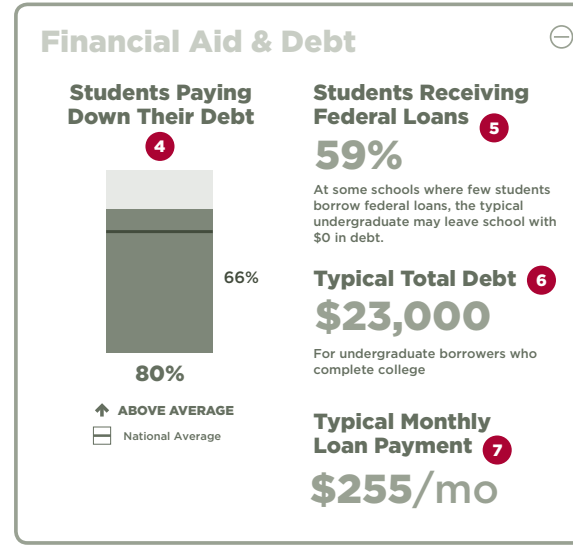
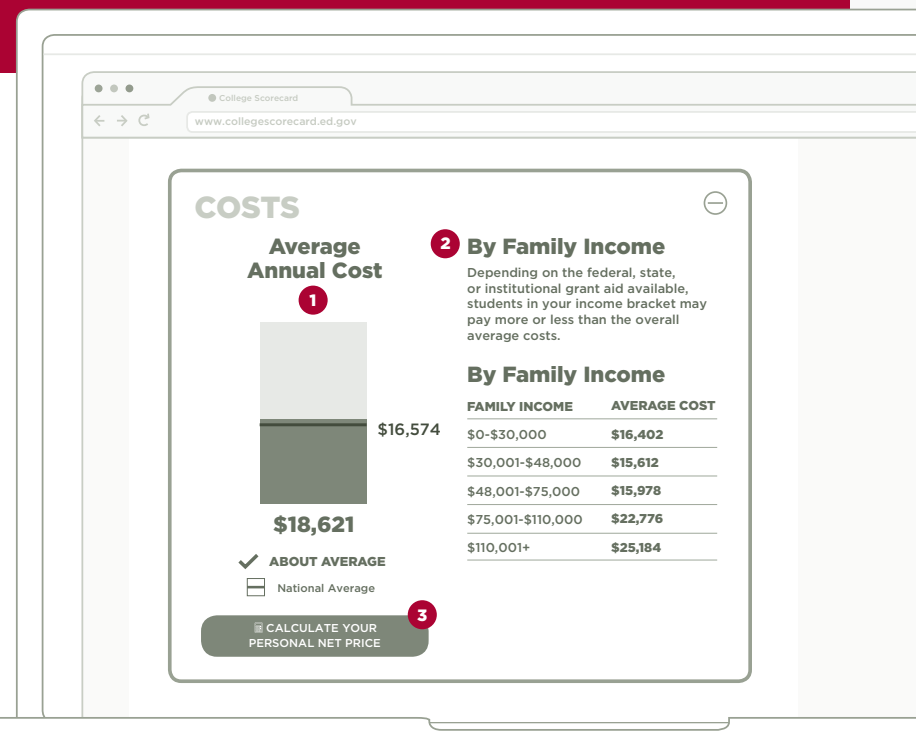
Costs >

Data source: Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS)
Includes: Only first-time, full-time students who received federal financial aid
Definition of cost: Average net price, calculated as the full cost of attendance, including tuition (in-state only for public institutions) and fees, room and board, and books and supplies, minus federal, state, and institutional aid

1 Your institution's dollar amount could appear high in relation to a competitor's if the competitor does not enroll as high of a percentage of students who receive Pell grants, federal loans, or both (the national average is 70%). Students who receive neither are left out of the calculation, so if an institution has a high proportion of these no-need students (particularly if they do not receive much merit aid), then its overall net cost is probably higher than reported here because including those students as well would likely raise its average. Separately, if the competitor is a public institution with a high proportion of out-of-state students, its overall net cost is probably higher than reported since only the net cost for in-state students is calculated here. A third factor could be the difference in cost of living dictated by the locations of the institutions, since the calculation is based on the full cost of attendance.

2 The average cost figure for family incomes higher than \$110,000 could be misleadingly low here if your institution enrolls a high proportion of no-need families, since they are not included in this calculation.

3 This is a link to your institution's net price calculator (on your own website).



< Financial Aid & Debt

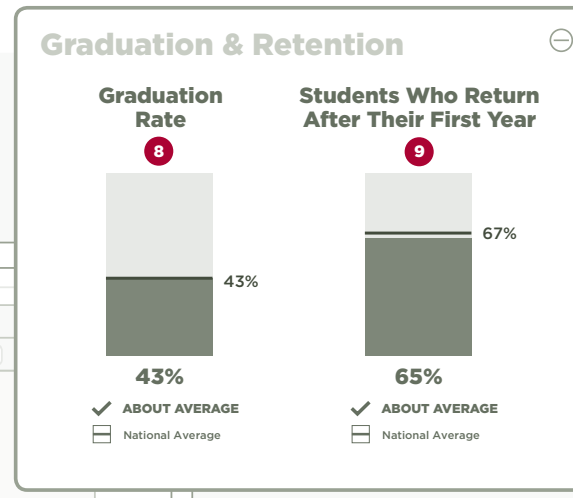
Data sources: National Student Loan Data System (NSLDS) and IPEDS
Includes: Only federal borrowers and grant recipients

4 This is the percentage of an institution's borrowers who have not defaulted on their federal loans and who have made progress in paying down their loans within three years of leaving the institution.

5 As the percentage of the institution's undergraduates who received federal loans in a given year (although it does not include any Parent PLUS loans taken out on their behalf), this data point is affected by the extent to which students both apply for and are eligible to receive federal loans.

6 This dollar amount (which does not include debt from private student loans or Parent PLUS loans) measures the accumulated amount of federal loan debt at the point of graduation from the institution.

7 Derived from the figure above it, this assumes repayment over a 10-year period at a 6% interest rate—although the federal student loan interest rate for new direct loans to undergraduates is currently lower than that.



< Graduation & Retention

Data source: IPEDS
Includes: Only first-time, full-time students (excludes transfer students, part-time students, and students who do not start during the fall)

8 Rather than a four-year graduation rate, this percentage represents students who earn a bachelor's degree within six years from the institution where they first enrolled. Your institution is probably not getting credit for starting students who go on to graduate elsewhere, and almost certainly not for graduating students who started elsewhere.

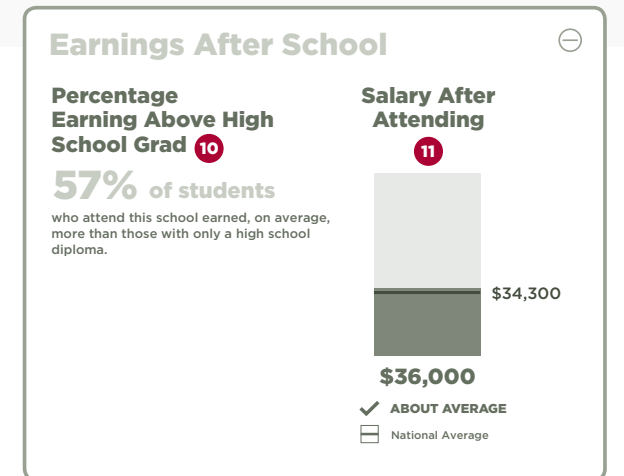
9 This is the percentage of students (first-time, full-time only) who return to your institution for their sophomore year—and it seems fairly straightforward!

Earnings After School >

Data sources: Cross-references earnings data from administrative tax records maintained by the U.S. Department of the Treasury with NSLDS data
Includes: Only federal borrowers and grant recipients, who left your institution for any reason (not just because they graduated) and are not currently enrolled anywhere (such as in graduate school)
Definition of earnings: The sum of wages and deferred compensation from all W-2 forms received for each individual plus self-employment earnings from Schedule SE

10 This takes as its baseline an earnings level of \$25,000, which is the approximate median wage of workers ages 25 to 34 with only a high school diploma. The percentage notes the share of your institution's federal-aid-receiving former students who are earning more than that amount six years after they first enrolled. Your institution's percentage could appear low in relation to a competitor's if a substantial portion of your former students are engaged in unpaid labor (i.e., volunteer work), since those with zero annual earnings are included.

Source: <https://collegescorecard.ed.gov/data/documentation/>



11 This is the average among those with positive yearly earnings (so unpaid volunteers are not a drag on this number) 10 years after they first enrolled at your institution. The main reason this figure will seem low for any institution is because it does not include the earnings of those who had no financial need as students. And a reason your institution's figure could appear low in relation to a competitor's is if your institution enrolls a greater proportion of your students in academic programs that feed low-paying career fields.

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Private colleges and universities can and should do a better job of demonstrating how a liberal arts education prepares students for successful careers. And there's a case to be made that administrators shouldn't dismiss new educational models and delivery methods simply because they are non-traditional or whiff of "vocationalism"—to do so would be a rejection of the liberal arts ideals of openness and adaptability that colleges themselves encourage in their students.

COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION IN A LIBERAL ARTS CONTEXT

by Brendan Mayer

Changing demographics, cultural shifts, and the Internet have ushered in a period of uncertainty and disruption in higher education unlike any in recent memory. After decades of healthy growth and relative stability, higher education is facing an identity crisis of sorts: Does its model still make sense in the 21st century? Do colleges equip students for success in the contemporary economy? Is college worth it?

As colleges and universities address these questions and make their case that a college education is, indeed, still relevant and essential, they must also account for the significant ways in which their students are changing. “Traditional” residential students between the ages of 18 and 22 represent a shrinking proportion of the overall student population in the United States. According to a 2013 *Wall Street Journal* report, only 29 percent of undergraduate students were of traditional college age and attending a full-time residential

institution. The profile of college students is becoming increasingly stratified, even within broad demographic groups. A first-generation college student living close to home might benefit from a significantly different educational approach than an international student from Beijing, for example.

Whether it's a fair characterization or not, higher education has been criticized for imposing upon students a “one size fits all” approach to a college education that has not significantly changed in hundreds of years. For all of the talk about “personalized education” and “customized learning objectives,” the building blocks of a bachelor's degree are essentially the same at most private colleges—and have been that way for a long time. The norms are a pre-determined number of faculty-led lectures delivered over a set 12- to 16-week period to provide students with a fixed number of credits. Once the required number and mix of credits have been earned (ideally within four years), a degree is conferred.

To be clear, this classic educational model has stood the test of time for good reason. At its best, the faculty-led learning experience equips students

KEY POINTS IN THIS ARTICLE

- There's a growing public perception that the traditional higher education delivery method is no longer fully relevant to today's world.
- Shifting student expectations and the power of technology are bringing competency-based education to the forefront of professional, online, and adult-focused programs.
- Liberal arts graduates find it challenging to convince prospective employers of their experience and preparation for a job.
- A competency-based model could translate liberal arts skillsets into real-world competencies for students and employers.

with much more than rote knowledge of facts; it exposes students to new ways of thinking about the world, and it instills in them the abilities to communicate, collaborate, and adapt to the challenges they will face in their careers and lives.

Yet there is a growing perception that the lockstep higher education delivery method is outdated in some ways, and no longer fully relevant to the world we live in.

A Lurch Forward?

For better or worse, what students expect to receive from their college education has shifted significantly. While 100 years ago college was viewed by a majority as a place to cultivate young minds and develop contributing citizens, a college education in 2016 is viewed in far less lofty terms. Now students and their families expect a bachelor's degree to provide a direct pathway to career success—whether through relevant preparation for the workplace or as entry to an advanced degree program.

To facilitate that, among the many technology-fueled trends in higher education to have emerged in recent years is competency-based learning, which is gaining prominence thanks to a push by federal policymakers.

Unlike massive open online courses (MOOCs), competency-based education (CBE) is less about scale and more about a new approach to college learning. MOOCs essentially deliver the traditional college lecture on a massive scale thanks to the reach of the Internet. While the cost of entry is potentially far less, the student experience doesn't change much—in fact, MOOCs further entrench the staid lecture model, since student-faculty interaction is nearly impossible

across thousands of locations and the anonymity of computer screens.

Competency-based education, on the other hand, calls for rethinking the time-based model that sees all students advance toward their degrees at the same pace. Students progress by demonstrating mastery of a knowledge unit or skill—a competency—regardless of how long it takes them.

“While few liberal arts colleges have embraced CBE into their core curricula, some forward-thinking traditional institutions are experimenting with competency-based courses and degree programs.”

Most colleges include a competency measurement already, of course, such as requiring students to pass exams or submit final papers that demonstrate their understanding of the course content. Yet at most traditional institutions, all students are required to spend the same amount of time during a semester earning their course credits. What often results is a rigid lecture-based approach that emphasizes time spent rather than learning objectives met.

However, with CBE, according to the Competency-Based Education Network, “progress is measured by students demonstrating through valid, reliably assessed learning objectives that they have acquired the knowledge and skills required to earn degrees or other credentials in a particular academic discipline or field of study, *regardless of the amount of time spent.*”

“Competency-based education changes the emphasis for students,”

explains Michael Horn, co-founder and distinguished fellow at the Christensen Institute. “The system is currently a sorting system. ‘She wasn’t good enough for physics so that’s why she failed.’ In a CBE system, the professor is more of a coach and advocate and spends the time it takes a student to get there. The education becomes much more [about] mastering the material.”

Today's Models

Competency-based education is not a new concept. Certain vocational programs have long emphasized competencies as an important means toward proving expertise and job-readiness. But shifting student expectations and the power of technology are bringing CBE to the forefront in the traditional college context. The Higher Learning Commission also raised the profile of competency-based endeavors in 2015 by releasing new accreditation guidelines for competency programs. While few liberal arts colleges have embraced CBE into their core curricula, some forward-thinking traditional institutions are experimenting with competency-based courses and degree programs.

Concordia University Wisconsin became the first private institution in the nation to award open digital badges for competencies through its master's program in educational design and technology. The university rebuilt the program from the ground up by “identifying all of the learning objectives and rewriting them as competencies,” explains Bernard Bull, associate vice president of academics.

“We came up with 75 competencies that were the kinds of things that people were looking for in this field,” says Bull.

“Then we built a project-based digital badge for each competency that signals when a student has mastered that particular skill.”

Once earned, these digital badges can then be displayed on a student’s LinkedIn profile so that prospective employers can see not only the advanced degree they’ve earned, but also the competencies they gained along the way through real-world projects. The badges anchor their education to relevant workplace skills and provide students with means to continually improve their expertise and update their résumés.

Westminster College (Utah) has introduced several competency-based online degree programs—including a bachelor of business administration. The programs are built around work-

related projects and faculty mentoring, says Richard Chapman, professor of economics.

“In our CBE programs, learners can submit projects and receive feedback on how they could improve their work to demonstrate mastery of competencies. Students can then incorporate the feedback from faculty and rework the project and resubmit,” says Chapman. “This creates a safer learning environment than traditional courses. It is okay for students to fail. They must learn from their failures, but we have found this is a giant advantage for underrepresented groups, especially first-generation college attendees.”


What makes these programs unusual are their close connection to skills that are transferable to the workplace and

the individual pacing afforded to each student, explains Chapman: “In our CBE programs, competencies are woven around work-related projects, cases, and issues. When a learner has successfully finished a project and demonstrated mastery of the ‘competency,’ they can move forward to the next project. Therefore, students can self-pace.”

To document the mastery of competencies, new models for transcripts are being developed through a partnership of the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO), NASPA: Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, and 12 colleges and universities participating in the Comprehensive Student Record Project. One of the project’s extended transcript prototypes is depicted below.


OFFICIAL TRANSCRIPT

This is an official transcript from the All American University Office of the Registrar. Student information is guaranteed unaltered from the source.

 **Atlas University**

OLIVIA HAFEZ
STUDENT ID: 123456
STATUS AS OF: 5/5/2015

MASTER OF SCIENCE
Nursing - Nursing Informatics
Integrate information technology to align with nursing practice.


 **80%**

DETAIL

Date Management and Health Care Technology **EVIDENCE** COURSE: MSN6414

- Differentiate database standard terminologies used by different health information systems.
COMPLETION DATE: 4.20.15 **Basic**
- Apply data management techniques to decision making in nursing practice.
COMPLETION DATE: 4.20.15 **Distinguished**
- Creative various data representation methods for reporting and professional communications.
COMPLETION DATE: Non Proficient
- Articulate strategies for querying and generating reports from health information system databases.
COMPLETION DATE: 4.20.15 **Basic**
- Communicate technical standards as they relate to various informatics technologies.
COMPLETION DATE: Basic

Interpret clinical nursing practice through the lens of nursing informatics.

 **80%**

Source: <http://er.educause.edu/articles/2016/2/an-evolving-technology-landscape-for-competency-based-education>

The Liberal Arts Context

The courses at Concordia University Wisconsin and Westminster College are largely representative of competency-based programs being offered at other private institutions. By and large, colleges are dipping their toes into CBE through professional, online, and adult-focused programs. This makes sense, since professional-track programs lend themselves more readily toward measurable hard skills and workplace-ready competencies. For this very reason, traditional colleges have been dismissive of competency-based education as a poor fit and “too vocationally focused” for liberal arts courses in a residential setting.

Yet Debra Humphreys, senior vice president for academic planning and public engagement at the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), wonders if there’s been a mistaken assumption about the goals of students interested in CBE. “Far too many assume that these students are only interested in narrow workforce training and that they aren’t also interested in the world-expanding possibilities that come from higher education. Far too much of the dialogue around CBE doesn’t attend to the broader well-being, emotional needs, or developmental trajectories of students targeted by CBE programs,” she argues.

Then is it possible that competency-based education has a role to play in the traditional liberal arts? Are institutions justified in relegating CBE to online courses intended for non-traditional students? Or are colleges missing potential opportunities to integrate CBE into their traditional course offerings? Do institutions that ignore the competency-based model ultimately risk disruption from organizations

that offer faster, more affordable, and more personalized competency-based degrees?

Given the uneven and fluid higher education landscape, the answers to these questions are far from clear. Yet Bull at Concordia Wisconsin believes the liberal arts and CBE are compatible.

“Far too much of the dialogue around CBE doesn’t attend to the broader well-being, emotional needs, or developmental trajectories of students targeted by CBE programs.”

Debra Humphreys

Senior Vice President for Academic Planning and Public Engagement at the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U)

“Alongside a traditional education, competency-based education can be a wonderful supplement to a four-year experience,” says Bull. Instead of radically altering course formats, he envisions adding a competency-based layer to already effective undergraduate learning frameworks.

“The faculty would focus on what it does best,” describes Bull. “Someone would work alongside students to translate their learning outcomes into competencies and vocabulary that the workplace will recognize.”

Bull points out that colleges have largely left it up to students to translate their own skills into the workplace after graduation. Convincing prospective employers of their experience and preparation remains one of the great challenges for liberal arts grads. In a competency-based model, colleges could address that by translating liberal arts

skillsets into real-world competencies for students and employers.

Horn likewise sees no conflict between traditional liberal arts and a competency-based approach. In fact, he sees an opportunity for traditional private colleges to integrate CBE to improve their educational offerings and further espouse liberal arts ideals.

“CBE has the potential to create very deep learning experiences,” says Horn. “When competencies are understood, there is a very clear sense of the objectives that you’re trying to help students master and a rigorous rubric for determining if students are indeed mastering them. In theory, professors should care very deeply if students are mastering competencies and learning.”

Still, Humphreys remains concerned about CBE’s ability to reproduce the support systems that, for example, first-generation students or younger, less well-prepared students need to succeed. She has observed it is difficult for CBE to reproduce the more comprehensive guidance that takes place in a liberal arts setting and believes “it is essential for advising in CBE to be very intentional about helping students see, document, and reflect on the larger arc of their learning—how each individual competency development is scaffolded and builds up to more integrative, project-based learning opportunities.”

Regardless of how it ultimately takes shape, integrating competency-based initiatives into traditional lecture-based courses requires a certain boldness to rethink and reimagine how we deliver a college education. Innovation in any industry involves a willingness to deconstruct the way things have always been done in pursuit of a better way forward. Implementing CBE in a liberal arts context is no different.

For one, the role of faculty might shift from a “sage on the stage” to a “guide on the side.” For smaller institutions, that is not a huge leap since faculty mentoring and one-on-one interaction with students are already emphasized. But in a competency-based model, classroom time would be spent less on lectures (students could watch video lectures on their own time outside of class), and more on coaching, discussion, and collaboration.

“That would be a big departure for today’s liberal arts colleges,” says Horn. “There would be fewer lectures because the lecture roots you in that time-based system. You’d end up with a much more active learning experience for students.”

Introducing competency-based education into traditional coursework would involve “reverse-engineering” programs the way that Concordia University Wisconsin did, by starting with the desired learning outcomes (competencies) first and designing courses around reaching and frequently measuring those outcomes—while allowing students to master competencies at their own pace. This is a sea change from the way most curriculums have typically been written, in which faculty determine the material they want to cover across the 30 lectures allotted to their course, with most synthesis taking place outside the classroom on the student’s own time.

A Potential Game-Changer

Rather than grapple with the difficult tasks of transformation, many institutions will likely continue to consider CBE as relevant only for a select number of professional programs or online courses. Yet there remains the real possibility that a handful of innovative organizations will embrace and integrate CBE in a way that “changes the game.”

Imagine if a rigorous college education could be delivered in half the time at half the cost with proven learning outcomes that translate directly to the workplace. Or envision an educational landscape 10 years from now in which students move in and out of institutions earning microcredits and badges that enrich their lives and that employers covet and respect. Would these scenarios not pose a threat to the prevailing bachelor’s degree model and to traditional institutions that are unwilling or unable to adapt?

“We cannot ignore what people want or need,” says Bull. “Four-year liberal arts colleges have a vibrant set of ideals,

but the time has come to dig deep and figure out what it looks like to live out those ideals in a contemporary landscape. Issuing diplomas is not the main value we provide moving forward. It’s about providing a world-class experience.”

Tumultuous times call for openness to new solutions, innovation, and entrepreneurial thinking—just the attributes that a liberal arts education ideally fosters in students. Liberal arts institutions that embody that same type of flexibility and adaptability may soon find it appropriate to seriously explore the possibility of a competency-based approach to delivering their own educational product. ■



The poster features a dark green header with the text "liberal arts" in a light font and "Illuminated" in a larger, white, serif font. Below "Illuminated" is the tagline "Pathways, Possibilities, Partnerships" in a smaller, italicized font. A white graphic element resembling a stylized flame or light source is positioned between the two text elements. The main body of the poster is white with a dark green border. It contains the event title "Liberal Arts Illuminated: Pathways, Possibilities, Partnerships" in bold black text, followed by the dates "July 11-13, 2016" in a large, bold, black font. Below this is the location "On the campuses of the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University in central Minnesota" in bold black text. The keynote speaker information "Opening Plenary Keynote Speaker Andrew Delbanco" is presented in bold black text, with "Author of College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be" in a smaller, italicized font below. On the right side, there are three paragraphs of text: "Liberal arts colleges are more important, and even more practical, than ever, but they face enormous and unprecedented challenges.", "There is tremendous opportunity in those challenges.", and "We are called to innovate, embrace risk in new ways, and define a future for our students and our institutions that positions the liberal arts as a critical part of our social, political, and economic future." Below these is the text "We are called to lead." and "Register today. liberalartsilluminated.com". At the bottom, it says "Hosted by: COLLEGE OF Saint Benedict + Saint John's UNIVERSITY". A small block of text at the very bottom lists supporting organizations: "With support from the Association of American Colleges and Universities, Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, The Council of Independent Colleges, Academic Impressions, The Corella and Bertram F. Bonner Foundation, and the Minnesota Private College Council. Special funding grants from U.S. Bank and The Lawlor Group."



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