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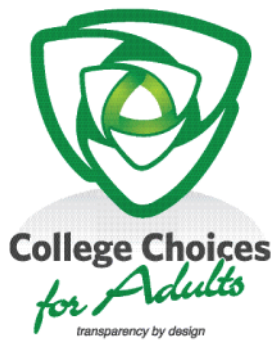
Transparency by Design: Strengthening a culture of assessment

Excelsior College, formerly known as Regents College, was founded on the philosophy that “What you know is more important than how or where you learned it”®. This motto reflects Excelsior’s emphasis on assessment and the aggregation of prior learning. Excelsior students rarely start from scratch; they are typically adult students who have attended more than a few colleges, work full time, and are juggling the responsibilities of raising a family while pursuing the completion of a degree that they may have started working on many years ago. Nearly one-third of Excelsior students are actively serving in the United States military, and many take advantage of our online courses to continue their studies while deployed.

Excelsior College provides some very unique opportunities for adults wishing to complete a college degree: a liberal transfer credit acceptance policy, credit bearing Excelsior College® Examinations, and Excelsior’s own online courses. Since the college was founded in 1971 over 141,000 learners have successfully used one or more of these methods to fulfill their dreams of becoming a college graduate.

Over the years, the assessment of learning outcomes in the various programs offered by Excelsior College has developed to differing degrees depending on the circumstances surrounding each program. Though our Nursing programs have long focused on the assessment of learning outcomes, this focus was not consistent college wide. An increasing sense of the importance of learning outcomes assessment and public transparency led the leadership of the college to bring the issue to the Presidents Forum, where the idea for Transparency by Design was born.

Participating in Transparency by Design has had several benefits for the college. Committing to this effort helped establish a college wide goal to improve the processes for learning outcomes assessment. It served as a commonly understood reason for developing conceptually consistent (though not identical) means of assessing student learning outcome information across programs, and yielded a tremendous boost in visibility of this issue across the college. Conveying the importance of assessment efforts and public accountability to the college community became easier when there was a specified format, timeline, and public face for these efforts.



Once some initial headway was made and the first program had posted information on the College Choices for Adults website, leaders of remaining areas of the college could better conceptualize how they might measure and report on learning outcomes assessment within their own programs. As other Excelsior programs were added to the site, enthusiasm for participation grew within the organization, providing positive reinforcement to continue our efforts.

Participating in the Transparency by Design/College Choices for Adults development process has also yielded positive implications for my job as the Director of Institutional Research at Excelsior College. Conversations with colleagues at other adult serving distance education institutions sometimes helped to clarify unique issues that we face and sparked additional ideas for improvement.

Our participation also provided, in many ways for the first time, benchmarking information that was previously unobtainable to a nontraditional institution like ours. The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), a portion of Transparency by Design reporting, is of somewhat limited use to our college on its own because our student population and educational model are quite different from the norm. The ability to compare our results to other Transparency by Design participants, however, greatly increases the value of the results.

I believe that participating in Transparency by Design has been good for our institution and has helped us to further our learning outcomes assessment goals. The visibility, both internal and external, that came from joining such an initiative has helped to keep everyone focused on the effort and provided direction to the work in a way could not have been accomplished had we been working alone.



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