

Degree Completion: Responding to a National Priority

John Ebersole

EXCELSIOR COLLEGE

THE NEED

America does not have the workforce it needs for the economy that it has. That was a conclusion of the Commission on the Future of Higher Education in 2006. The Commission went on to note that if current trends are not reversed, the US economy and per capita income will actually decrease over the next 15 years, for the first time in US history.

In response to this growing concern, President Obama has set a national goal of increasing undergraduate degree completion by 60 percent over the next 15 years. According to the National Center for Higher Education Measurement Systems (NCHEMS), this level of degree production is necessary to maintain America's competitive position within the knowledge-based global economy. Having once led the world in the percentage of adult workers age 25–64 who have a degree, in 2006 the US ranked 17th among those with a bachelor's degree (National Center for Education), and is tied for 11th overall (*Education at a Glance*).

According to the National Center for Public Policy in Higher Education, there have been at least two reasons for this drop in degree completion: "Colleges and universities have become preoccupied with advancing their prestige instead of achieving publically-defined purposes" (Wegner) and Americans feel increasingly that while essential to economic advancement, degree attainment is "out of reach financially" (Immerwahr). There is now a third, as the downturn in the national economy has forced public institutions to freeze enrollments.

© 2010 John Ebersole, President, Excelsior College, Albany, NY

Yet even before the recession it was clear that higher education would not be able to meet the President's goal by graduating only traditional-aged students. NCHEMS' forecast shows the country falling short of the required increase by nearly 20 percent if the focus stays solely on 18–24 year olds. In order to reach the competitive level called for by 2025, NCHEMS notes that greater attention will need to be given to the 54 million working adults who have some college but no degree (Kelly).

Traditional institutions may need to re-evaluate their mission and consider their responsibility for assisting the current workforce as well as help to prepare the next generation of workers. This may require new infrastructures or processes such as those discussed below to best serve the working adult student. Institutions may also want to re-think their attitudes toward online instruction and offer some elements of degree programs in a blended format of classroom and web-based coursework.

As institutions consider their response to the challenges facing our workforce and our economy, there is a laboratory of sorts that has been at work in the areas of adult-degree completion and prior-learning assessment for nearly 40 years. Its methods and successes may help others with their planning.

AN INSTITUTIONAL OVERVIEW

Inspired by the British Open University (OU) in the 1960s, the Regents of the State of New York created their own "open" institution in 1971. With funding from the Ford and Carnegie Foundations, Regents College became America's first external-degree provider. Like the OU, Regents was founded as an open-enrollment, adult-focused institution for those who had historically not been well served by more traditional forms of higher education. Anyone with a high school diploma or a GED was afforded admission. While contrary to the strategy of greater student selectivity to achieve prestige, the open-enrollment philosophy has given many mid-career adults a second chance at earning a degree. It has also provided many minority students access to higher education and economic growth.

Accredited by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education since 1973, Regents offered no instruction until 25 years after its founding. Up to that point, students requiring coursework in order to complete a degree would typically be directed to other institutions after an assessment of their prior learning.

In 1998, Regents was granted a charter as an independent, not-for-profit institution. A condition of the new status was that the college change its name to “Excelsior” (Latin for “ever upward” and the state’s motto).

Commencing in 2003, Excelsior embraced online learning in addition to the independent-study formats used by its associate’s degree in nursing (ADN) program. Today, the majority of Excelsior’s 31,000 students remain candidates for assessment, with approximately 5,000 students taking online courses exclusively. All graduate programs require online coursework.

THE EXCELSIOR PROCESS

Because of the college’s commitment to meeting students where they are academically, as well as geographically, Excelsior has adopted a number of procedures and credit-earning methodologies not found at other institutions. The commitment and expertise of its advisors is often cited as one of Excelsior’s greatest strengths. Despite growing enrollment, advisors continue to create individual learning plans for each entering student. This requires aggregating and assessing prior learning, as well as mapping different options for fulfilling outstanding requirements. Once the learning plan is in place, advisors continue to assist each student in ensuring the applicability of particular courses, whether from Excelsior or elsewhere. An appropriate analogy might be that advisors act as primary-care specialists who guide students through the degree completion process much like a doctor might manage one’s healthcare.

Under the external-degree model, students could transfer 100 percent of their degree work to Regents. Over the years, however, this policy has been modified to one of low residency whereby some coursework—information literacy and capstone assessments—is now required.

Associate’s and bachelor’s degrees are earned through a methodology that aggregates credit from multiple sources and then assesses prior learning for degree applicability. It matches earned credits against degree requirements as set by the New York State Department of Education. Any areas of deficiency can be satisfied through one of five options: transfer credit from another institution, credit for training, credit by examination, credit by assessment, or coursework at Excelsior.

DEGREE COMPLETION TOOLS

Transfer credit

The typical Excelsior student presents an average of five transcripts upon application for admission. The college's advisors aggregate this credit; determine its fit to the degree sought; offer alternatives, if appropriate; and create a degree completion plan. Older courses in fast-changing fields, such as information technology, often have to be refreshed. As required by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (Excelsior's regional accreditor), criteria have been established for evaluating and accepting credit from nationally accredited institutions, as well. In the case of credit earned abroad, the college uses international transcript evaluation services to determine equivalencies.

Excelsior's liberal transfer policy enables its students to complete a degree without having to retake coursework previously completed with a passing grade. As a result, in 2009, the value of accepted transfer credit by the college was \$185 million (using Excelsior's undergraduate tuition rate of \$315). This represents a tremendous savings of time and money to the student and, potentially, to employer and/or federal financial aid programs.

Credit for training

Excelsior recognizes credit recommendations from the American Council on Education (ACE) for prior military or corporate training. Additionally, the college's faculty may conduct assessments of instruction from non-academic sources when it has not been ACE reviewed. With funding from the US Department of Justice, Excelsior has, for instance, reviewed and proposed credit recommendations for a number of government-supported law enforcement academies.

Through a combination of ACE credit recommendations and coursework at Excelsior or elsewhere, many active duty military students find that they are able to complete a degree with little additional work. In 2009, *Military Advanced Education* and *GI Jobs* magazines designated Excelsior as one of the top 10 institutions serving the armed services.

Credit by examination

With attention from the Lumina Foundation and the Obama administration, institutions are rediscovering prior learning assessment as a means to accelerate degree completion and to reduce cost. At Excelsior, this process

relies less on the portfolio method (which it does employ) than on its own battery of psychometrically validated examinations.

Regents College offered a credit-by-examination option to students shortly after its founding, drawing upon Regents' resources and historic work of examining New York's graduating secondary students. Today, Excelsior offers some 50 subject examinations of its own, while also accepting credit from the College Board's CLEP Program and the DSST Program of the Educational Testing Service (ETS). With the philosophy that what you know is more important than where or how you learned it, Excelsior (and before it Regents) has been a leader in the learning assessment field.

For those wishing to apply credit earned through examination toward a degree being earned elsewhere, Excelsior provides a transcript that reflects exam performance. Currently, some 1,500 institutions from across the country accept credit-by-exam toward their degree requirements.

Excelsior College Exams (ECE) are available to all and are administered on demand at Pearson/Vue testing centers worldwide. A unique aspect of the ECE Program is the prospective test-takers' ability to take a practice exam prior to taking the one of record shown on a transcript. This allows prospective test-takers to evaluate their readiness and to reduce the risk of having a "failed" on their transcript. The cost of Excelsior's ECE assessments varies somewhat by subject area and number of credits awarded for passage. However, the cost per credit, including the practice exam and testing fee, is typically under a \$100 per unit of credit.

Credit by assessment

In addition to its examinations, Excelsior employs other forms of learning and competency assessment. They range from computer simulations to performance assessments in subject specific settings (e.g., a hospital).

Excelsior's pioneering assessment of clinical skills in nursing was developed in the early 1970s under a grant from the Kellogg Foundation. This capstone assessment is known as the Clinical Performance Nursing Examination (CPNE). Prospective associate's degree nursing students must pass this assessment within three attempts as a condition of graduation. The CPNE is conducted in a hospital, with real patients, over a period of three days. Students must demonstrate the clinical skills expected of a new registered nurse (RN) to the satisfaction of three PhD/MSN evaluators.

The CPNE has been developed in accordance with standards for performance test development of the American Educational Research Asso-

ciation, the American Psychological Association, and the National Council of Measurement in Education. It has also been reviewed by ACE and the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) for academic credit and validity. Since its introduction in 1974, the CPNE has been administered to approximately 40,000 graduates of the ADN program. Those graduates going on to take the national licensing exam for RNs (the NCLEX-RN) consistently meet or exceed the national associate degree pass rates for first time test-takers.

Excelsior is in the process of creating similar outcome assessments for its other major programs. As higher education moves into an era of increased accountability, such tools are expected to help in demonstrating both learning outcomes and institutional effectiveness.

Credit from instruction

For students who require instruction to complete a degree, Excelsior offers more than 300 online courses. In 2009, it also offered the first face-to-face instruction (at the Army's Sergeant-Majors Academy, Ft. Bliss, TX) in its 38-year history.

RELATED STUDENT SERVICES

Excelsior provides support services that might be expected of an open-enrollment institution. These include the following:

- Those needing assistance in bringing their writing and computational skills to a college-ready level can take refresher courses; these are supplemented by a new online writing center.
- Tutoring is available for most course content areas on a 24-hour basis at no cost to the student.
- Similar to the tutoring support, Excelsior also offers coaching to those needing support in dealing with the problems of life-family, work, financial, time management, etc. This has proven particularly important to at-risk students who have shown signs of disengagement within their program (infrequent presence online, failure to submit assignments, etc.). As with tutoring, there is no cost to the student for this assistance.
- A dedicated library support team is available online to help students find assigned readings and to guide research from the college's library support unit at Johns Hopkins University.
- Peer networks assist in creating a sense of community and in matching shared interests or needs.

ACADEMIC CALENDAR AND FORMATS

As other institutions have discovered, year-round programs, compressed terms (whereby students complete two courses per term in an eight-week sequence rather than concurrently), and cohort models are appealing to adult learners. Time is often as great a concern as money. Accelerated formats enable students to move toward an income-enhancing credential more quickly.

CREDIT BANKING

Another of Excelsior's (Regents) pioneering services for adults is the credit bank. After having prior learning assessed, many adults either want to wait before completing their degree or want to complete it elsewhere. The college's credit bank allows students to consolidate various transcripts, as well as include prior learning assessments and ACE credit recommendations. For minimal cost, those using the bank can regularly add work done elsewhere. In addition to having a consolidated transcript, those using the bank can receive a clear understanding of credit earned and an idea of the work that is still needed.

CONCLUSION

It is encouraging to note that research by the National Center for Public Policy in Higher Education has found that open-access colleges such as Excelsior are responsible for the greatest gains in graduation rates over the past decade (Doyle). While critics will be quick to question the quality of Excelsior's graduates and their academic experience, the college is able to point to learning-outcome assessments not found elsewhere. For example, the Excelsior's associate's degree in nursing program (the nation's largest, with more than 14,000 enrollments) requires satisfactory completion of the hands-on, clinical-skill competency assessment described above as a program requirement. No other associate's degree nursing program in the country has such an assessment of competency as a condition of graduation.

By focusing on the assessment of what has been previously learned, combined with the knowledge that can be obtained asynchronously online, Excelsior believes that it is well positioned both to ease the anxiety of returning to school after many years (an oft-cited concern that can be an obstacle to re-engagement), and to maintain affordability. Through the acceptance of previously earned credit, determinations of credit equivalency,

and credit-by-examination, the cost of an Excelsior credential can be less than that of even a public institution, where a minimum number of credits have to be completed in residence, regardless of prior work.

The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) has recently released a study of 62,475 student records at 48 colleges and universities. Findings included the following:

- Students with credits obtained through prior learning assessment (PLA) had higher graduation rates. More than 56 percent of PLA students earned a postsecondary degree within seven years, while only 21 percent of those without did so.
- Students with PLA credit showed greater persistence. Even those students who had not earned a degree by year seven showed greater amounts of credit accumulation than those without PLA credit. More than half of those who had yet to earn a degree by 2008 (end of the study period) had accumulated 80 percent or more of needed credits by that point. This compares with 22 percent of non-PLA students with no degree who had reached this level of progress.
- Students with PLA credit need less time to graduate. PLA students earning bachelor's degrees saved on average of between 2.5 and 10.1 months of time in earning their degrees.

Institutions seeking to respond to President Obama's challenge and the country's needs may wish to consider open enrollment at least for adult programs, the assessment of prior learning (guided by ACE and CAEL), credit-by-exam (whether from Excelsior, CLEP or DSST), and more liberal transfer policies. In addition to Excelsior, such nonprofit institutions as Empire State (NY), Charter Oak (CT), Thomas Edison (NJ), and the Western Governor's University (UT) have embraced many, if not all, of these practices. Together we seek to assist those who have not always been well served by traditional higher education—including those 54 million adults with some credit but no degree. A failure to rise to the growing challenge of an insufficiently educated workforce will ultimately cost us all. 

REFERENCES

- Doyle, W. R. "Open-Access Colleges Responsible for Greatest Gains in Graduation Rates." Highereducation.org. National Center for Public Policy Higher Education, Feb. 2010. Web.
- Higher Education Attainment: The Obama Benchmark (forum). *The New England Journal of Higher Education* Summer 2009: 28-32. Print.
- Immerwahr, John, Jean Johnson, Amber Ott, and Jonathan Rochkind. *Squeeze Play 2009 The Public's Views on College Costs Today: Public Agenda and The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education*. San Jose, CA: US National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2009. Print.
- Kelly, Patrick. *Mounting Pressures Facing the US Workforce and the Increasing Need for Adult Education and Literacy*. Education Commission of the States. Denver, CO. Summer 2007. Conference presentation.
- Klein-Collins, Rebecca. *Fueling the Race to Postsecondary Success: A 48-Institution Study of Prior Learning Assessment and Adult Student Outcomes*. Chicago: Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, Mar. 2010. Print.
- Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. *Education at a Glance*. Paris. 2009. Print.
- US National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education. *Report of the Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education*. San Jose, CA. September 2006: Issue Paper 9. Print.
- Wegner, Gregory R. *Engaging Higher Education in Societal Challenges of the 21st Century*. San Jose, CA: US National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, Apr. 2008. Print.