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The Co-Curricular Record: Enhancing a Postsecondary Education

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Introduction

Who defines the value of a postsecondary education? Whether it is college or university education in Canada, students are hoping that their education will lead to a successful job. The academic institution challenges the intellectual mind, stimulates conversation, and cultivates a student body of critical thinkers that will go on to make contributions in their society. While the liberal education sparks the curious mind to explore topics in social sciences, humanities, and sciences, the changing nature of society has challenged this traditional liberal education. Applied or occupationally-oriented education requires depth and breadth courses that require students to learn far beyond their immediate field of study. The purpose is to educate successful citizens.

Yet institutions are expanding, class sizes are growing, and the competition is rampant. Many students need to work for pay on and off campus while they are studying and many have dependents to support. As students become overwhelmed, they become buried in their books, struggling to catch up. Many students begin to feel their goals tiptoe away, when that “B” on the test means a competitive co-op opportunity slips away or medical school is no longer in their reach. The student now feels that the institution has failed them in that their goals are no longer attainable, and, in many cases, a second career option was never considered. However, postsecondary education was never intended to be a means to an end, but rather a space to explore one’s interests, define one’s self, develop a range of skills, and expand one’s mind to the endless opportunities before them. The postsecondary institution should cultivate a sense of excitement and exploration, not anxiety and disappointment.

When we talk about defining the value of a postsecondary education, what matters is not how the institution defines it, but how the student *perceives* the meaning of their experience. Yet, if it is the perception that matters, then what role can the institution play? Postsecondary institutions across Canada have begun to make a strong statement by bringing back this holistic notion of a liberal education—albeit a broader interpretation. To spark students’ interest in self-exploration and self-awareness, universities and colleges across Canada are stating in a clear and vocal way, that the student experience should extend beyond the classroom, and that co-curricular experiences are important. While the academic curriculum is the main focus, a broader student experience can positively contribute to students’ success.

Many Canadian universities and colleges have created a program called the “Co-Curricular Record,” with the intention to encourage engagement in activities that extend beyond the classroom. This is

premised upon the belief that engagement yields a more robust and holistic academic experience, contributing to student satisfaction, retention, persistence, and experience. Decades of research have highlighted the intrinsic value in co-curricular engagement, which complements the students' academic studies, and enhances a more robust and satisfactory experience. While these programs are voluntary in nature, they are making a bold statement: students *should* be engaged beyond the classroom. Rather than being a means to an end, education can be the journey that will help define that end. Universities and colleges are not just institutions to "become a doctor" or "become a technologist" but a place of self-discovery and self-development. The goal is to graduate with a sense of purpose and understanding of one's interests and skills, not necessarily discovering a particular career. In fact, the reality of today's economy is that many people will have multiple careers; therefore, the focus of development should be on the self and not the job.

What is a Co-Curricular Record?

The Co-Curricular Record (CCR) is a multi-faceted program, which in its broadest sense, both encourages and incentivizes engagement. At its core, the CCR is intended to enhance students' learning and development, encourage the discovery and reflection of self-awareness, and foster an environment that encourages civic responsibility and engagement. The CCR, sometimes called a transcript, helps students find and track experiences beyond the classroom, links those experiences to competencies and validates those experiences on an official institutional document. This definition highlights the three pillars of a CCR program: search, reflect, and record.

The Three Pillars of the Co-Curricular Record

The CCR generally provides a centralized database of eligible co-curricular activities that is searchable by students, allowing them to peruse a broad range of opportunities. By providing this database, the challenge of the institution is to define co-curricular experiences, navigate breadth and scope, while addressing a number of questions and considerations. The CCR incentivizes co-curricular engagement, yet the opportunities offered through this program, determines its success. The preceding questions must be: what are the barriers to engagement, and what motivates students to be involved? By acknowledging the individualized needs of the student population, the CCR program can capture opportunities for the various types of students, and provide mechanisms to foster and facilitate engagement. For instance, a common barrier for students at institutions located in urban centres is commuting. With a bulk of co-curricular programming offered after classes, commuter students must embark on their trek home, often unable to participate in these opportunities or required to make alternative arrangements. A CCR program can catalogue activities that occur between 9:00 a.m. and 9:00 p.m. versus the 9:00 p.m. – onwards, empowering students to find those opportunities that suit their lifestyle and the time they have available. Thus, a searchable database can provide more than a centralized hub for co-curricular opportunities, but rather can address the individual concerns of an institution's student population.

The second pillar of the CCR program is to connect experience to learning, to encourage self-reflection and self-awareness, and highlight to the student their personal growth and development. A wealth of literature acknowledges the benefits of co-curricular engagement—however, often unbeknown to the student. Many students may recognize their development either during or after-the-fact, while others may not make that connection. The CCR is intended to embed a sense of intentionality in co-curricular programming—to bring to light the breadth and depth of skills and competencies that students develop. Some institutions will connect competencies to activities, which signals to the student prior to their involvement, the intended learning and development that is embedded in the activity. Others will require students to select “achievement statements” after their experience, which empowers the student to reflect on their learning. Despite the various methods, the intention is to 1) acknowledge the learning and development offered through these activities, and 2) help the student reflect on those experiences. Some institutions recognize paid activities on their CCR providing students who need to work the opportunity to be engaged.

The goal is to stimulate self-exploration, self-development, and self-awareness. Echoing the sentiments offered in the introduction, postsecondary education should be a time of personal growth, whilst identifying one’s interests, values, and skills. The intention of the CCR is to provide the opportunity for a personalized postsecondary experience amidst a structured institution. While the institution defines the requirements and expectations of a program, students can define and create their individualized co-curricular experience. The CCR acts as a catalyst to spark and embed intentionality and self-reflection, and the competency framework provides students with a tool and language that will aid the student in their development and future pursuits. Upon reflection and the identification of developed competencies, students may use that information to articulate their skills in an interview, on their resume, curriculum vitae, or the Co-Curricular Record itself.

The third pillar of the CCR program is the record itself. A CCR is a formal and official institutional document that validates student involvement in co-curricular activities. Often sealed with the institutional logo, the official record serves multiple purposes. Firstly, it demonstrates an institutional commitment to the holistic development of the student by highlighting the importance of engagement in experiential learning opportunities. This formal recognition advocates that learning and development is embedded in these opportunities, thus raising the profile of the benefits and value of co-curricular experiences. Second, it formally recognizes the individual’s participation in these activities by validating their involvement. Students will often highlight co-curricular experiences on their resume, sometimes misrepresenting the depth of their engagement or inadequately highlighting the transferable skills they develop. The validation process encourages students to follow through with their commitments, formally recognizes their completion, and highlights their engagement in a meaningful way. Since skills/competencies are highlighted on the record itself, these experiences are emphasized in a language that employers and graduate

schools recognize and understand. The formal recognition the CCR provides, is intended to be a useful tool that students can then submit to employers, graduate schools, scholarships, awards, and bursaries.

Current Landscape

The Co-Curricular Record was a program that was created and adopted by a number of U.S. postsecondary institutions in the 1980s. Often called a student development transcript, many of these programs no longer exist and there seems to be little information that highlights the demise of these programs. Conversely, universities and colleges across Canada are rushing towards the development of a CCR. With a few institutions developing a CCR in the mid-2000s, such as Wilfrid Laurier University and University of Calgary, the majority of institutions have been developing and implementing a CCR within the last few years including: University of Toronto, University of Alberta, Dalhousie University, McGill University, UOIT, Seneca College, and Durham College.

While it appears most institutions are already in the process of implementing, creating, or deliberating whether they should develop a CCR, there are institutional challenges that must be overcome prior to implementation. Institutional buy-in is critical in successfully implementing a CCR program, which includes managing the interests of various stakeholders, including senior leadership, student affairs and services staff, faculty, and students. The extent to which these different perspectives are integrated relate to the scope of the CCR, including how it is determined and defined. Coupled with this, there are often differences in philosophical ideals about the types of activities that should be characterized as “co-curricular”. For these reasons, many institutions have developed CCR programs that capture different types of activities. Included in their criteria, some institutions have defined that all activities captured on the record cannot be academic in nature. Other institutions have argued that “co-curricular” should include academic-related activities, such as service-learning and research opportunities, since they provide opportunities for skill and competency development. Other criteria that some institutions include are a minimum time commitment, paid vs. unpaid activities, and attachment to the institution.

The range of activities captured on the CCR varies by institution, leading to levels of inconsistency across institutional records. One of the articulated benefits of the CCR is that it will help students frame their experiences which they can then market to employers, graduate programs, scholarships, etc. While the widespread uptake on implementing a CCR will increase its profile, the variation may lead to implications if adopted into current processes of applying for jobs, scholarships and bursaries, graduate schools, etc. For this reason, colleagues across Canada have expressed a need for developing a network of professionals who are coordinating the CCR program at their institution. While in its infancy stage, a group of over 25 individuals from universities and colleges across Canada are beginning to form a Co-Curricular Record Network. The purpose of the network will be to share challenges and successes in developing and implementing a CCR

program, to share institutional best practices and research, to discuss the future of the CCR program in Canada, and to provide the space to discuss any other questions or concerns.

Literature

There is a wealth of literature that provides conceptual and empirical evidence that supports the benefits of student engagement in co-curricular activities. For decades now, researchers have found correlations between involvement and student satisfaction and retention. There are theoretical frameworks that have been used by researchers to help describe and examine student involvement, including Alexander Astin's theory of involvement. Astin's (1999) theory of involvement demonstrates the importance of student time and energy in order to achieve intended learning and development. Astin summarizes his theory:

Student involvement refers to the quantity and quality of the physical and psychological energy that students invest in the college experience. Such involvement takes many forms, such as absorption in academic work, participation in extracurricular activities, and interaction with faculty and other institutional personnel. According to the theory, the greater the student's involvement in college, the greater will be the amount of student learning and personal development. (p. 528-529)

This theory acknowledges the importance of a holistic experience, whereby coupled with academic work, "involvement" includes interactions with the institution and co-curricular engagement. A student's success is enhanced when they are wholly integrated into the institution, echoing Tinto's argument (1987) that the more integrated the student is with the fabric of the institution, the more likely they are to persist until degree completion. Without this integration, students feel at odds with the institution and isolated. These concepts are grounded on the principle that "success" is the sum total of the experience, including learning and development which may occur inside and beyond the classroom. By focusing on curricular success, students may alienate these other critical and complementary experiences.

Theorizing on these principles, the institution can play an integral role in student learning and development. Astin (1993) developed the input-environment-outcome model to evaluate the influence of college on a student's development and the growth or change they experienced throughout. This model demonstrates that by creating an environment that is both conducive and supportive of co-curricular engagement, desirable outcomes can be achieved. By placing emphasis on co-curricular engagement through a formal program, such as the Co-Curricular Record, institutions can influence outcomes by adapting its environment. Whereby the current focus is academic success, institutions can broaden the meaning of success to include a more holistic definition of "involvement". However, the shift towards a more holistic understanding of success requires the clear articulation of benefits. Academic grades have

a clear benefit and connection to entry into post-graduate and professional programs. Thus, holistic involvement should also have a clearly articulated benefit.

While the academic curriculum provides students with the foregrounding knowledge in particular fields and provides the opportunity to develop a host of skills, there are skills that are desirable in the job market that may be fostered through involvement both inside and beyond the classroom. In 1992, the Conference Board of Canada's Corporate Council on Education undertook a project to identify and communicate the skills that they require as employers (McLaughlin, 1992). There were three characteristics of equal importance that employers agreed upon: 1) people who can communicate, think, and continue to learn throughout their lives; 2) people who can demonstrate positive attitudes, behaviours, responsibility and adaptability; 3) people who can work with others (McLaughlin, 1992). While this study is two decades old, the Conference Board of Canada has continually highlighted important skills needed in the workplace. The Employability Skills 2000+ is a list of critical skills that are desirable in the workplace, including fundamental skills, personal management skills, and teamwork skills. (The Conference Board of Canada, 2000). While the Co-Curricular Record (CCR) is not a direct response to what employers are looking for, it does acknowledge that students are concerned about post-graduation employment prospects. University of Windsor's Brooke White, Executive Director of Student Development and Support, acknowledges that employers are looking for well-rounded applicants, and that the university acknowledged the difficulty many students were having articulating and marketing the skills and competencies they developed through co-curricular engagement (Drolet, 2010).

If perceived benefit is integral to the success of a CCR program, then it is important to understand employer perceptions. Bryan, Mann, & North (1981) conducted the National Co-Curricular Transcript Survey in spring 1980, to assess employer reactions to co-curricular transcripts versus the traditional resume. With a random sample of 350 employers, three "representative" government agencies, and 145 employers who had interviewed students from the University of North Dakota, a total of 498 employers were included in the sample, with a final response rate of 49.5%. In the study, four sets of co-curricular transcripts and resumes were distributed to equal numbers of employers, each receiving one set with a closed-ended survey with 33 questions. The four sets included a male and female with high co-curricular involvement and low co-curricular involvement, and each set contained two documents, a traditional resume with co-curricular activities listed within the resume, and an identical resume with the co-curricular activities listed on the attached co-curricular transcript. The overall reaction to the inclusion of the co-curricular transcript was positive, where more than 7 out of 10 employers (71%) indicated they "would definitely want" or "would prefer to have" a co-curricular transcript included in job application (Bryan, Mann, & North, 1981). With this, 26% of employers answered that they place a "great deal" of importance on applicant's co-curricular activity experience, and 66% indicated "some" importance. With the competency/skill reflection as an integral component of the program, Bryan, Mann, & North (1981) asked

employers the importance of including this information on the transcript, stating that they “supported the inclusion of some measure of competencies or skills gained as a result of a student’s involvement in co-curricular activities.” Since the co-curricular transcript is an official validated institutional document, employers were asked to indicate the importance of verification to them, with 48% not “very important” or “important” and 22% responded “somewhat important”.

While there is limited literature on the Co-Curricular Record program, especially in the Canadian context, the literature does demonstrate the benefits of co-curricular engagement on student learning and development. In addition, employers continue to highlight their desire for employability or “soft-skills”, which are a key component of co-curricular engagement.

Conclusion

Whether students pursue a college or a university education, the CCR is beneficial. Universities are perceived to be an isolated microcosm of broader society, where students often talk about “the real world” as being life outside of the university. However, universities have a responsibility to not only educate and foster intellectual inquiry, but to contribute to the society in which it is part of. The CCR will thus not only provide students with the opportunity to search for opportunities and track them on an official institutional document, but it will serve a higher purpose, encouraging students and the institution to look beyond its “ivory tower” and view the meaning of a liberal education as an individualized experience situated in a broader community.

While colleges provide career-specific education and training, graduates seek employment in a competitive job market. These students need to demonstrate to employers that they have “the problem-solving abilities and technical skills to succeed” in the workplace (Colleges Ontario, 2012). The CCR’s documentation of participation and achievement in activities outside the classroom enhances the student’s formal education.

Postsecondary institutions provide an education, and this education should be reflective of the competencies and skills that students are looking for. The CCR complements the Academic Transcript by providing students with a tool to help them identify, evaluate, reflect on and discuss the intentional learning that occurred as a result of engagement in co-curricular activities. Coupled with the academic curriculum, these experiences beyond the classroom can positively contribute to students’ success and development. The CCR provides students with a searchable database, encourages reflection on the skills and competencies developed, and produces an official validated record. It signifies the importance of self-awareness and self-development, while highlighting the importance of learning and growth in experiences both within and beyond the classroom.

For these reasons, universities and colleges across Canada are implementing Co-Curricular Records to encourage a more holistic experience. The challenge in developing these programs is to identify the

scope and breadth of the record, and to address concerns that may arise. Will this program benefit some students over others? Will this impact the application process to graduate programs, and what are potential implications of this? Will this add pressure on students who are already overwhelmed? Moving forward, these questions among others need to be discussed both internally and cross-institutional in order for the CCR to be a beneficial program for students.

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