

Capella University: Innovation Driven by an Outcomes-Based Institution

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CAPELLA UNIVERSITY

In 2010, Capella University became the first online university—and the first for-profit institution—to receive the CHEA (Council for Higher Education Accreditation) Award for Outstanding Institutional Practice in Student Learning Outcomes. In 2009, Capella University also received the Platinum-level Learning Impact Award/Best Outcomes-based Learning Solution from the IMS Global Learning Consortium; the WCET Outstanding Work (WOW) Award from the Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications; Best in Class, Interactive Media Awards, from the Interactive Media Council; and Blackboard Greenhouse Exemplary Course Award.

How did Capella University accomplish this? More importantly, how is Capella systematically demonstrating high academic quality and successfully assessing learning outcomes for students?

This article examines why Capella declared itself an outcomes-based institution, and explores the comprehensive learning and career outcomes system that Capella spearheaded over the last decade, along with the facets that go into Capella's outcomes-based approach. It also will touch on future capabilities of the system.

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WHAT OUTCOMES-BASED MEANS

Capella University (www.capella.edu), which was founded in 1993 and accredited in 1997, is a regionally accredited, fully-online university that has built its reputation by providing quality graduate education for working adults. As of March 2010, the university enrolls more than 37,000 students and offers 42 degree programs.

Our approach to outcomes-based learning involves defining what success looks like in a particular field and then developing the most direct educational path to that success. Faculty and specialized staff collaborate to determine the current thinking and professional standards and guidelines in each professional field. We work with employers to find out what they expect from their best employees. We use those insights to focus our academic programs on specific, measurable expectations called learning outcomes. (See Figure 1.)

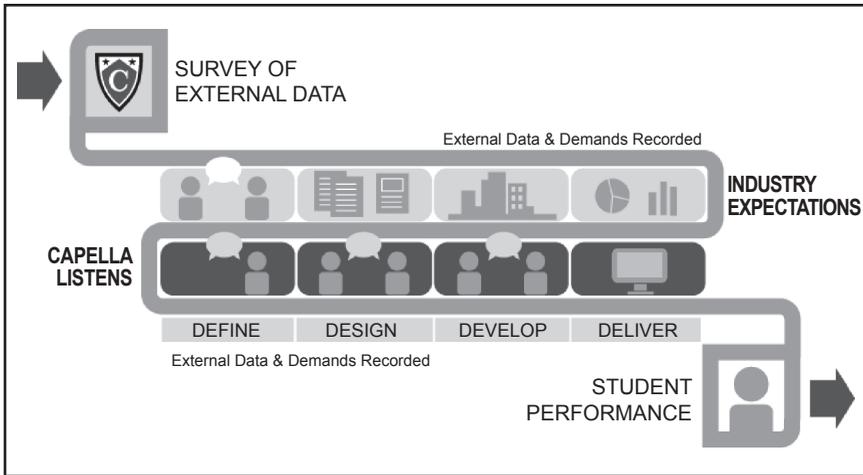


Figure 1. Capella University faculty and staff work with employers, professional associations and other sources to identify the knowledge, skills, and values needed to excel in a particular profession. Once those desired end results – the learning outcomes for the program – are identified, faculty, curriculum specialists, and course development team reverse engineer the rest of the curriculum to lead to the student’s on-the-job and career success.

Capella consistently gets acknowledged for its scalable and comprehensive curricular, instructional, assessment, and analytics system. It gets recognized for the outcomes it produces. The complex process of implementing an outcomes-based approach can be broken down into these key facets:

- Establishing and focusing on relevant learning outcomes. This begins by identifying relevant learning outcomes designed to produce career readiness and advancement for students and graduates. It includes describing exactly what different performance levels of those outcomes look like, then backwards-designing the entire curriculum from the outcomes and their acceptable demonstrations all the way to assessment strategies and qualitative scoring guide criteria. It encompasses assessing demonstration of course competencies as well as program outcomes themselves to determine developmental progress. Next—and this is key—it involves validating both the curriculum’s outcomes and the students’ demonstrated learning outcomes by measuring career outcomes of graduates.
- Taking advantage of our faculty and functional expertise.
- Operating within a scalable, data-rich online environment.
- Making public our assessment methodologies and results to stakeholders, thus using our commitment to transparency to improve productivity and student success.

This article will examine these areas in turn. First, however, it will look at what prompted Capella to become outcomes based.

OUTCOMES-BASED ORIENTATION

As a fledgling institution in a competitive environment, we wanted to create traction quickly and effectively while best leveraging our online delivery model and our adult-focused mission. The idea of being an outcomes-based institution was sparked by our participation as a charter member of the Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP) for our continuing accreditation through the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools.

In declaring ourselves an outcomes-based institution from the outset, we departed from the traditional focus on inputs because we realized that adult students have different needs than traditional students. Capella’s students are older, work (often full-time), and do not live on a campus. Education represents a big investment, so it follows that working adults are keen to determine whether it will pay off for them. They want to know what their education will do for them, what they will know and be able to do, and how other students have fared as a result of their investment in education. They bring a focused motivation to earn a degree because it is the means to a better life. While they require structure, they also demand flexibility so that they can balance their personal and work lives.

Capella’s commitment to outcomes aligned precisely with the inherent outcomes-based orientation of adult students, and it was a matter of creating the best model for implementing the approach.

RELEVANT LEARNING OUTCOMES

Capella’s outcomes-based curricular model begins by identifying adult students’ educational needs for a program. In short, Capella starts by looking at the desired end results: the skills and knowledge adults need to be successful in the workplace, the skills and abilities that employers seek, and the standards and expectations set by professional organizations.

Once the the learning outcomes for the program are identified, Capella’s faculty, curriculum specialists, assessment specialists, and course development team reverse engineer the rest of the curriculum to lead to career success. Clear and specific program outcomes, and all the elements of the curriculum essential to achieve learning to reach those outcomes—from course competencies to assessment strategies and scoring guide criteria—create a straight line of sight for students and faculty. (See Figure 2.)

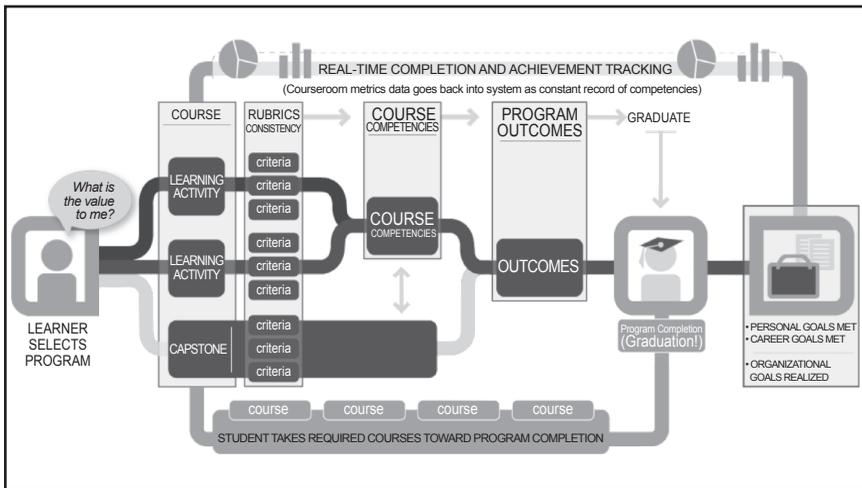


Figure 2. This represents Capella University’s outcomes-based design model. Each course is reverse engineered with the program outcomes in mind. Learning activities in a course build course competencies and are measured consistently through assignments graded with scoring guides, most often rubrics. The rubrics outline the expectation for each learning activity, so students and faculty know how students’ work will be assessed. The rubrics in each unit align to the course competencies. The course competencies build and interact to meet the intended program outcomes: to equip students with the knowledge, skills, and values for immediate and future career success.

As well as curriculum, our comprehensive system integrates instructional, assessment, and analytics functions. The result is a powerful model designed to provide detailed information that promotes student success by better informing students, faculty, and staff about the important dimensions known to predict success.

The system also offers excellent opportunities for continuous improvement. Because we can extract information from the early stages of the learning process, we also can engage in predictive modeling on important target variables, including course completion, persistence, and attrition. The more precisely we can assess actual learning, the better we can identify how well students are learning: who is doing well and who may be at risk. Going forward, we use this key information to improve student support and personalize academic interventions.

FACULTY AND FUNCTIONAL EXPERTISE

Faculty expertise forms the heart of our collaborative/intellectual model of curriculum development, instruction, and assessment. Because Capella focuses on career relevancy for adult students, it recruits and attracts faculty who fit a scholar-practitioner profile of strong academic credentials—83 percent have doctoral degrees—and extensive professional experience. Capella values and expects continued learning and development of faculty through participation in outside scholarly activities or practice in their discipline. In our health care program, for example, faculty members include leaders of regional, national, and international organizations, as well as major hospital and health care systems. And in mental health, our faculty members help set national standards through their work with professional organizations.

All prospective faculty must pass a course designed to prepare them for successful online teaching at Capella. The course ensures consistency with Capella's educational philosophy, outcomes focus, and instructional/assessment strategies that promote active learning and model the role of scholar-practitioner. Faculty positions are structured to center on teaching and learning assessment, facilitating the competency achievement of students, and contributing to curriculum development.

We rely heavily on our faculty's expertise and currency in their profession to bring learning to life and to authentically assess students' competency and outcomes demonstration. This is accomplished by partnering faculty with others who offer functional expertise. We bring faculty together

with curriculum specialists, course developers, and instructional designers, assessment specialists, and research analysts to design, build, deliver, assess, and report upon curriculum, assessment, and learning effectiveness. This collaborative and intellectual approach is effective and results in rich interaction and courseware.

Our collaborative / intellectual model is built on faculty and functional roles working together using the best standards available. It harnesses the central strengths of faculty members as scholar-practitioners and brings in other functional experts who know how to deliver instruction, how to build curriculum, how to see across an entire curriculum, and how to work with faculty to determine assessments that are authentic and meaningful. The end result is a stronger, more effective learning model.

OPERATING WITHIN A SCALABLE, DATA-RICH ONLINE ENVIRONMENT

In the online world, every interaction is observable and reportable, and a potentially very powerful phenomenon. We can use data to understand program health, learning effectiveness, and student success in ways we did not fully imagine 10 years ago.

The technical infrastructure, comprised of our learning management system, online curriculum authoring system, electronic scoring guides, and eportfolio tool, as well as online meeting technologies and document sharing, creates tremendous scalability and data.

All institutions of higher education use information technology. But Capella, as a wholly online institution, must take IT sophistication to a much broader and deeper level. Our system generates and captures extensive data on the entire teaching-learning exchange, from when the student logs-in, how long she dwells on any certain activity, when she contacts the help desk, to demonstrations of learning outcomes judged by our faculty.

We can assess student performance at very granular levels, such as at a course assignment level or daily activity in the courseroom. We know that a student's courseroom behavior patterns, which are established very early in the course, are predictive of the ways that this student will complete the course. Knowing this, we can monitor the patterns, alerting staff or faculty when the pattern is likely to produce unfavorable outcomes, or if it suddenly changes. We can then offer the student appropriate academic support to help ensure his or her success.

This ability to use data to support program health, learning effectiveness and student success holds great potential for students, faculty and staff, as well as institutional productivity in higher education.

MAKING ASSESSMENT METHODOLOGIES PUBLIC

Capella goes beyond its commitment to making public our expected learning outcomes. We also provide key stakeholders with visibility into the grading process and the general public into our assessment methodologies. This transparency raises the stakes for high quality since we cannot rely on the mysteries of individual instructors' grading practices. With a focus on the importance of a coherent, shared understanding of our curriculum by all of our program faculty and students, we took the next step and made our assessment practices transparent as well.

Electronic scoring guides with explicit performance criteria are made available from the beginning of each course to students, faculty, and staff. We all know how a student's work will be graded. The validity of our scoring guides is scrutinized to ensure quality and consistency.

Consider how this works in a culminating experience such as a capstone course for a bachelor's or master's program. In these instances, the expected program-level learning outcomes are assessed summatively and we employ a fairly rigorous process to validate the assessment methodology. First, the scoring guides are checked for face validity. Then, under the guidance of an assessment specialist, the faculty chair, lead faculty, and all capstone faculty grade sample learning artifacts with the scoring guide. Next comes a synchronous online meeting where the faculty simultaneously replicate their judgments with the scoring guide via instant polls. This process immediately highlights levels of (dis)agreement, as well as confusing language, misinterpretation of the criteria, and varying levels of faculty commitment to the importance of some outcomes. The online meeting continues with prioritizing the discussion points by the degree of disagreement and addressing each issue. The final scoring guide and shared understanding of the curriculum and assessment expectations create validity and reliability for the resulting scoring-guide data. When the team of experts agrees that the criteria are right and being correctly applied to the students' work to create consistent expert judgments, they report the results to our students and other faculty, as well as the public, through Transparency by Design's College Choices For Adults site (www.collegechoicesforadults.org) and Capella's own results site (www.capellareresults.com). These sites also con-

tain information on career outcomes and alumni satisfaction. Prospective students tell us they appreciate this level of transparency and find value in reviewing program outcomes and how well previous graduating cohorts performed those intended learning outcomes.

AN EXCITING FUTURE

We think that Capella's approach to higher education delivers academic quality and produces results—observable, measurable, quantifiable results—about program learning outcomes. The path to those results encompasses the university's collaborative approach, external and internal transparency, the use of technology, the extensive data generated, and opportunities for continuous improvement.

Conceptually, Capella's learning and career outcomes system holds many exciting capabilities. But we have important work yet to do, including generating reports to convert data into information and into the hands of students, faculty, and staff more quickly. Ultimately, we will be able to track all assessments and student progress in real-time to ensure that the high-performing student is increasingly challenged, and the developing student gets the right resources for support. Capella intends to improve learning effectiveness and efficiency while also improving the student experience and completion rates.

Developing our outcomes-based curricular model has been rewarding, but it is a continuing expedition. We have plenty of improvement work ahead to better serve adult students. 