A Complete Picture of Learning

University of Central Oklahoma helps students track and showcase learning that happens outside the classroom

Overview

Students attending college or university mature both inside and outside the classroom. The academic transcript describes a student's academic achievements, including courses taken and grades received.

Unfortunately, no "transcript" exists to document the experiences and skills a student develops outside the classroom.

Leadership, an understanding of diversity, and problem-solving are just some examples of the abilities and skills that will give young adults a competitive edge once they reach the workforce. But without a tangible way to track them, how can educators know if they're actively developing those qualities?

Guided by its mission to help students learn through transformative experiences, the University of Central Oklahoma (UCO)—one of the top public universities located in metropolitan Oklahoma City—is seeking to address this gap.[3] Using the Brightspace platform, UCO is providing its students with new tools to better showcase a more detailed and complete picture of their experiential learning activities.

AT A GLANCE

Client   University of Central Oklahoma

Students   17,000+

Faculty   936[1]

Level   Post-Secondary

Solution   Brightspace Online and Blended Learning solution

CHALLENGE

- No way for students to demonstrate transformative learning happening in tandem with academic experience
- Students struggle to articulate their growth and development of "soft skills" to future employers
- No framework for faculty to evaluate transformative learning and track student progress against "The Central Six" core value tenets

SOLUTION

- Student Transformative Learning Record (STLR) is created
- STLR competency structure associates assignments and co-curricular activities with specific Central Six tenets
- ePortfolios provide students with vehicle to showcase feeback and artifacts to prospective employers and grad schools
- Integration between students' campus card and STLR system via Brightspace API to track student attendance at STLR-tagged events

RESULT[2]

- 177 faculty trained on STLR to date
- 134 courses identified with transformative learning objectives in one semester
- 100 student activities tagged as STLR
- 10% increase in student course completion rates compared to similar non-STLR courses

Challenge

"There is definitely value in the academic transcript, but student learning is more than the marks they receive on assignments. We were not showing the learning taking place outside the classroom in the transcript," says Sonya Watkins, Associate Vice President of Information Technology for UCO. "We wanted to help our students better capture the experiential learning that is becoming increasingly important for graduate school entry and employment."

HELPING STUDENTS DEVELOP BEYOND THEIR DISCIPLINE

UCO had been studying the concept of transformative learning for close to a decade. In 2007, it created "The Central Six," core value tenets of a student's transformative learning.

The first of the six tenets is discipline knowledge and focuses on a student's major field of study. The other five tenets focus on a student's global and cultural competencies, health and wellness, leadership, research, creative and scholarly activities, and service learning and civic engagement.[4] These tenets round out the perspective of transformative learning and put students at the center of their own reflective learning experiences. That allows them to develop beyond-disciplinary skills and expand their perspectives on their relationships with themselves, others, their communities, and the environment.

UCO students and faculty have embraced "The Central Six" concept, but the program did suffer from one significant drawback. "We knew we were providing these kinds of experiences for our students, but we lacked a framework for capturing and assessing them," says Watkins.

In 2013, UCO established a committee to create a model and structure for assessing "The Central Six," with sponsorship from the VP for IT and CIO, the Provost and VP for Academic Affairs, and the VP of Student Affairs (also known as the "trifecta"). In order to ensure collaboration, the committee was comprised of members from each of the sponsors' divisions who came together to brainstorm ways for students to track and showcase their progress against the tenets.

[4]"The Central Six." *UCO: Transformative Learning.* University of Central Oklahoma, n.d. Web.

Solution

BRIGHTSPACE WAS A NATURAL FIT

UCO adopted Brightspace in 2011, and since that time has seen a significant increase in its use for instructional purposes. With over 89% of the faculty using Brightspace during the spring 2015 semester,[5] it just made sense to utilize the platform for the delivery, assessment, and tracking of student transformative learning opportunities. An added bonus of using the Brightspace platform for the Student Transformative Learning Record (STLR) was the integrated ePortfolio.

KEEPING IT EASY FOR FACULTY AND STUDENTS

In designing the new tracking and assessment system, one of the committee's key implementation goals was to find a solution that was easy for faculty and students to use. "We didn't want to create extra work for our already busy faculty," explains Watkins. "So we opted to align assessments they were already using in class—essays or journals, for instance—to one of the tenets. This meant we were not asking faculty to develop something new."

Using the Rubrics tool in Brightspace, UCO built a competency structure specific to STLR. Now, faculty and staff can associate assignments and co-curricular activities with a specific tenet. Faculty also use the Dropbox tool to access the rubric and competency structure and provide students with STLR-related feedback and grading. Students push STLR-related feedback and artifacts to Brightspace ePortfolio, where they can store, share, and reflect on achievements.

"Students are encouraged to push as many artifacts as possible into their ePortfolios," says Watkins, "so when it comes time to design a presentation they will have multiple options available to them to demonstrate their transformative learning experiences."

Working with D2L's Customization team, UCO used the robust Learning Tools Interoperability (LTI) and Application Program Interface (API) integrations in Brightspace to create a custom dashboard where students can track their progress against each of the tenets. "Our students use the dashboard to see what they have achieved and view up-and-coming available activities where they can engage and contribute to their STLR," says Kathryn Wullstein, Director of the Technology Resource Center at UCO. "The dashboard has become an essential component of STLR. It makes it easy for students to check their progress and push artifacts to their ePortfolio."

UCO also used the Brightspace API to integrate the STLR system and the physical campus card used by students to access events. Now, when students use their card to swipe into an event tagged to STLR, their participation is assigned to the appropriate tenet and recorded in the dashboard. Students have the ability to push this information to their ePortfolio. "It was a joint effort. Our in-house technology team created the middleware and D2L created the connector," explains Watkins.

Result

EARLY DAYS BUT STRONG ADOPTION

UCO piloted the STLR solution in two phases to test the waters with students and faculty. The official campus-wide roll-out took place in the fall of 2015.

As of fall 2015, UCO has 134 courses total (one semester) incorporating transformative learning objectives—serving approximately 3,000 students. There are 100 student-based projects now tagged as STLR opportunities, such as working with faculty or internships. Faculty adoption of STLR has far exceeded UCO staff expectations, with 177 faculty taking part in STLR training to better understand the overall concept of transformative learning, learn how to create activities and assignments aligned to tenets, and see how they can use Brightspace to set up and assess activities.

Since STLR rolled out across the UCO campus, there have been 2,745 student enrollments in curricular and 6,292 student enrollments in co-curricular activities tagged to transformational learning.[6]

Students are enthusiastic about the opportunity to showcase the full picture of their capabilities. "STLR has helped our students better articulate their overall skill set and define their transformative learning experiences to an employer," says Watkins. Prior to STLR students didn't have a consistent way to define it, but they knew transformative learning was happening. "STLR and the Brightspace ePortfolio are helping them structure their many educational experiences and connect the dots," adds Watkins.

The STLR program is still in its early days, but UCO is already observing positive student engagement trends. "We are seeing a significant (greater than 10%) increase in completion rates for STLR courses. We are also experiencing a slight increase in retention rates," says Watkins. "Students participating in STLR courses are also demonstrating a higher GPA. As students see the value of what they are doing and receive positive feedback related to tenets and their academic performance, it is motivating them to stay in class, learn more, and become more engaged in their learning efforts."

WHAT STAFF, STUDENTS, AND FACULTY ARE SAYING

"Discovering ways to systematically explore what is curious to me about teaching and learning (but yet not always obvious) has filled my professional life with possibility. Through STLR, I am considering my personal and professional role in teaching more intentionally."
Assistant Professor at UCO

"I love the concept of transformational learning. I feel that it empowers students and gives them confidence in their earning experience."
College of Education Professional

"Since I have been working on this project I have felt more confident as an undergraduate student in all my classes. I love research now."
Student participating in a STLR project

[6]Ibid.

About D2L

D2L is the software leader that makes the learning experience better. The company's cloud-based platform—Brightspace— is not a common one-size-fits-all learning management system (LMS). It's easier to use, more flexible, and smart. With Brightspace, you can personalize the experience for every learner to deliver real results. The company is also a world leader in learning analytics: its platform predicts learner performance so that you can take action in real time to keep them on track. Brightspace is used by learners in higher education, K–12, and the enterprise sector, including the Fortune 1000. D2L has operations in the United States, Canada, Europe, Australia, Brazil, and Singapore. | **www.brightspace.com**

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