

The logo for D2L, consisting of the letters 'D2L' in a bold, white, sans-serif font, with a small 'TM' trademark symbol to the upper right of the 'L'.

D2L™

More graduates, less cost

University of Akron taps into Brightspace to offer alternative learning paths that graduate more students at dramatically reduced tuition costs

Overview

The cost of a college or university education has never been higher, with tuition soaring 538% since 1985.¹ At the same time, access to a post secondary education has become more readily accessible to students of all backgrounds. Minority students are attending college in record numbers. Women now account for the majority of undergraduates nationwide.² And the gap is closing between traditional college-age students and adult learners, with an increasing number of older individuals returning to school to advance their professional skills or pursue a new career. The National Centre of Education Statistics projects that by 2020, there will be 10.7 million adult learners enrolled in higher education programs, as compared to 13.1 million traditional age learners.

Rising costs of education and demands of non-traditional (adult) learners puts increased pressure on post-secondary institutions to accommodate. Learners from all backgrounds are demanding a more affordable education, ideally delivered at an accelerated pace, so they can put their hard-won degree to work. But while greater affordability and an accelerated pace are the desired goals, they can never come at the expense of learning.

University of Akron (UA) is Ohio's most influential public university, providing the local economy with a workforce highly trained in diverse disciplines. Known for its innovative approach to education, UA is actively experimenting with alternative learning paths and tuition models, striving to provide its students with affordable and accelerated access to education. Working with D2L and the Brightspace learning management system (LMS), UA was able to launch an experimental alternative-learning pilot program, called GenEd Core, offering general education courses to students online at a dramatically reduced tuition cost.

AT A GLANCE

Client	The University of Akron
Students	26,000
Instructors	22 for GenEd Core program
Level	Post-Secondary
Solution	Brightspace Online and Blended Learning solution
Services	Technical Account Services

CHALLENGE

- Graduate more students faster while reducing tuition costs

SOLUTION

- Reduce time and costs to graduate through alternative-learning models
- Leverage technology and blended learning to dramatically lower tuition costs

RESULT

- Better understanding of alternative-learning models, including time to implement, barriers to implementation, and what a supporting LMS implementation might look like
- Exceeded GenEd Core enrollment goal of 1,000 with 1,173 enrolments over two semesters

¹<http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2013-08-26/college-costs-surge-500-in-u-s-since-1985-chart-of-the-day>
²http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cha.asp

 Challenge**REDUCING TUITION AND ACCELERATING TIME TO GRADUATION**

Only 26% of adults in Ohio hold a bachelor's degree, compared with a national average of 31%. That 5% gap represents billions of dollars in lost economic activity to Ohio—by some estimates, \$2.5 billion a year for each percentage point.

To address the issue, the Ohio Board of Regents has been charged to work with University System of Ohio adult career centers, community colleges, and universities to implement curricular models for graduating students with the skills employers are seeking as quickly and cost-effectively as possible.³

“We have a very real need in this community to get more students educated, but we also exist in a reality where reduced state aid has led to an increase in tuition costs,” explains Wendy Lampner, Design and Development Services Manager at UA. “This creates a lot of pressure for students, for parents, and for the institution.”

UA's quest to reduce tuition through alternative learning models began back in 2012, explains Lampner. “There is not a lot of flexibility in some of the costs of education. You have to maintain a certain level of faculty and meet the needs of the students. Increasing class sizes is just not the answer. We examined many options along the way, but one of the most obvious was to look at the timing of the degree. Many students come to us these days with some level of education, life experience or

work experience. If we could just find a way to equate that experience to the academic credit, we could reduce the actual dollars to educate the student and reduce the time it would take them to graduate. This would allow us to graduate more students more quickly and lower tuition costs at the same time.”



Solution

UA began its quest to reduce tuition costs and speed time to graduation by first documenting step-by-step the learning process from the faculty and student services side, and then looking for ways the model could be broken apart—for instance, charging students for only the services they need. The team also began reaching out to other academic institutions innovating in this area. It made a call to the University of Wisconsin, which has successfully implemented a self-directed competency-based degree program called The UW Flexible Option, a program also established to improve accessibility to education for state citizens.

Recognizing technology would play a significant enablement role in any alternative approach, the UA team also reached out to technology vendors such as D2L to conduct an environmental scan of available software and technologies, each providing a contributing piece of the puzzle.

MOVING ONLINE TO REDUCE TUITION COSTS

In one of its first steps toward alternative learning, UA launched a pilot program called GenEd Core, aimed at improving education accessibility and affordability. Offering a series of general education courses to new and current UA students at a significantly reduced cost of \$50 tuition per credit hour, GenEd Core provides an 86% reduction in tuition costs—less than half the average rate offered by community colleges.

To get the GenEd Core pilot program off the ground, UA needed to work with faculty to bring many of the courses online. Using Brightspace, courses were made as interactive as possible using embedded media created with Articulate Storyline, GoAnimate, Zaption and Explain Everything. Release conditions were heavily used to ensure students online were meeting performance expectations and completing appropriate readings. Self-assessments ensured that students understood the content and were well prepared for quizzes and exams. Student progress was then carefully tracked with percentage completion of work outlined weekly so faculty could quickly scan progress and connect with students falling behind.

“We saw an opportunity to make these courses as innovative as possible to improve learning,” says Lampner.



Result

At the outset of the GenEd Core pilot program, UA set a goal of 1,000 enrolments across two semesters. This goal was exceeded, with 601 students registering in the fall and 572 in the spring—a total of 1,173 enrolments.

UA is carefully studying the demographics and results of the GenEd Core pilot, to understand the longer term impacts and benefits of alternative-learning approaches. “Our faculty is looking to determine what factors predict success for students in this model, for instance, how many hours a week do they work, are they married, do they have children?” says Lampner. “We are trying to better understand if there is a correlation between a student’s life situation and their outcomes.”

Through a variety of research initiatives and pilot programs, UA is proving there is a way to graduate a greater number of students more affordably. “We are still at the stage where we are testing many models,” says Lampner. “Learning what works, what doesn’t, where we can innovate and where we can’t.”

The cautious approach adopted by UA is for good reason. “It takes a lot of patience and time to evolve a large educational institution to a new model and way of business,” says Lampner. “We need to be certain at every step we are upholding the education of our students and not in any way letting them down. That risk is simply unacceptable to us.”

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.D2L.com

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