Chapter 6

New Degrees of Opportunity at OC@KU: Addressing the Needs of Today’s Learners With Affordable, Flexible, Competency-Based Educational Options

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ABSTRACT

Today’s learners need flexible, cost-efficient ways to increase knowledge, enhance skills, or complete a college degree. The rising cost of college tuition coupled with the demands of work/life balance challenge many individuals seeking advanced education. As such, higher education administrators need to identify new approaches to learning and higher education that address these barriers. This chapter addresses the question: How do institutions of higher education address the needs of flexible, cost-efficient education for today’s adult learners?

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INTRODUCTION

Open College at Kaplan University (OC@KU) offers free online services and personalized mentoring to help learners identify and organize prior work and life experience and skills that could count toward a degree or career growth. OC@KU is an excellent option for adult learners looking to enhance existing skills and/or complete a degree. OC@KU addresses a growing trend in competency-based education and the need to create affordable, flexible learning options for adult learners. OC@KU has reduced the economic barriers allowing individuals to pursue learning to enhance their academic and professional interests. The implications for institutions of higher education lie in establishing ways to improve access and reduce cost for individuals pursuing higher education with a design to meet academic and professional needs.

Beginning January 2016, Open College (OC@KU) became part of the School of General Education. This change has merged together a wealth of resources including administrators, faculty, staff, and the university’s first open degree program: the Bachelor of Science in Professional Studies (or BSPr). Learners enrolled in the professional studies program develop a customized degree plan or Individualized Degree Plan (ILP) and can earn credit towards their degree through: experiential learning credits, course assessment credit by exam, and/or open courses and OERs.

It takes a campus community to promote student success: Across Kaplan University, there is a collaborative effort to engage faculty and leverage faculty expertise across the disciplines. For example, our credit-for-work experience courses, EL206: Academic Prior Learning Portfolio and LRC100: Documenting Your Experiences for College Credit allow learners to build an online experiential learning portfolio, and potentially earn college credit for multiple college-level courses for that college-level equivalent prior learning: OC@KU relies on evaluations from subject matter expert faculty – thus leveraging faculty as a resource. Professional studies learners may also use the Portfolio Assessment of New Learning (PANeL), which is a Project-based Assessments of New Learning, to gain the knowledge and skills needed to meet the outcomes of a course described in their Individual Learning Plan (ILP). A PANeL is a portfolio created by the student that houses evidence of college-level learning that will be assessed to potentially award college credit for a Kaplan University equivalent course.

This flexible approach to higher education aligns with the needs of adult learners who are often limited in terms of time and financial resources to complete their degree. The BSPr degree is a competency-based degree program which is a growing trend in higher education. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2017), “Competency-based strategies provide flexibility in the way that credit can be earned or awarded, and provide learners with personalized learning opportunities. These strategies include online and blended learning, dual enrollment and early college high schools, project-based and community-based learning, and credit recovery, among others,” (p.1). Relevancy is important to adult learners as they seek connections between the classroom and real-world experiences. “This type of learning leads to better student engagement because the content is relevant to each student and tailored to their unique needs. It also leads to better student outcomes because the pace of learning is customized to each student,” (U.S. Department of Education, 2017, p.1).