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Online learning portals: Customizing colleges right out of higher education?

By David Glenn

Somewhere out there is an ambitious but frugal high-school graduate who wants to avoid a traditional college path. Maybe she has read Anya Kamenetz's *DIY U* or one of the other end-higher-education-as-we-know-it manifestoes that have circulated in recent years.

Her plan is to pursue an education à la carte, spending as little money as possible. She'll use free online resources like MIT's OpenCourseWare project. She'll find workplace apprenticeships. If she needs specialized training, she might take a few classes at a local college. Maybe this will all eventually add up to a formal degree, and maybe it won't. What our student really cares about is cultivating skills and wisdom, and persuading employers that she has educated herself well.

That strategy might or might not be smart. But an online infrastructure is emerging that could someday make it easier to attempt it. Depending on how it evolves, this infrastructure might profoundly change how Americans certify their skills and transform their relationship with colleges.

The new infrastructure consists of online portals that allow students to create portfolios that document their workplace skills and to have those portfolios assessed by college professors. The portals—the most prominent are Learning Counts and Knext—also let students package their certification credentials, including scores from the College Board's College Level Examination Program and specialized certifications such as Microsoft's.

Taken individually, those elements are not new. Colleges have assessed students' prior workplace learning for decades. But the portals for the first time give students universal, accessible, portable tools for certifying what they know and can do.

The portals have been designed to award college credits and to help students finish degrees. But there is no reason, in theory, why students couldn't eliminate the middleman. Instead of packaging their portfolios and test scores and petitioning a college for credit, they could take those packages directly to employers and petition for a job.

"I absolutely think that that is where this will lead," says Pamela Tate, president of the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, known as CAEL, which is the leading force behind the Learning Counts portal. "We are in discussion with so many employers who have said to us, 'Once students have these portfolios, this could be incredibly useful for our own purposes.'"

At least two employers, Ms. Tate says, have asked about adapting Learning Counts for their hiring and promotion processes.

Marina Gorbis, executive director of the Institute for the Future, a California-based think tank, has recently been lecturing to accrediting organizations about what she calls the disaggregation and personalization of higher education. She does not believe that universities will disappear; in fact, she says face-to-face learning communities are more important than ever. But she does expect traditional credit-hour and degree structures to change fundamentally as students find new tools for demonstrating their competencies.

"Degrees will continue to play an important role," Ms. Gorbis says. "But it's very hard to assess higher-level skills simply by knowing that someone has a degree." For that reason, she believes, portfolios and specialized tests will become more important to employers than simple course transcripts. And that, in

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turn, might lead students to lower their costs by doing as much of their learning as possible outside the high-tuition confines of a traditional degree program.

Caution is in order, of course, when predicting earthquakes in higher education. Seers have been prophesying the end of the traditional degree structure since the Web emerged, in the 1990s, and their track record is no better than Harold Camping's. As wages for Americans without a college education have continued to fall, people have naturally clung to the security of the bachelor's degree. For large categories of workers—nurses, police officers, and administrative assistants among them—employers expect more, not less, formal education than they did 20 years ago.

But there is a widespread sense that tuition cannot rise forever at twice the rate of inflation. Something has to give. If these new portals make employers comfortable with accepting credentials other than traditional degrees, they might change the nature of college-going for millions of students.

How the Portals Work

Learning Counts, a collaboration of CAEL, the College Board, and the American Council on Education, made its debut in January. More than 80 colleges have signed up as pilot institutions. Knext, a project of Kaplan Higher Education, went online in early May and so far has just three educational affiliates.

In each service, interested students begin with a free telephone-advising session to determine whether their workplace learning might warrant course credit. Students who pass that threshold are invited to sign up for an online course that will teach them to prepare portfolios that reflect their learning. (Each subject area for which the student wants credit—say, computer science or management or communications—gets a separate portfolio.) Those portfolios are then submitted to an evaluator from a national panel of subject-matter experts, who deems the portfolio worthy (or not) of course credit.

Knext's fees are \$999 all-inclusive, while students in Learning Counts pay \$500 for the portfolio-development course and \$250 for each subject-area portfolio assessment.

The 80-plus two-year and four-year colleges affiliated with Learning Counts have pledged to accept the credit recommendations of the national panel. And the three for-profit universities affiliated with Knext (most notably, Kaplan University, its corporate sibling) have promised to accept the Knext panel's credit rulings.

Students are free to present their portfolios and test scores to unaffiliated colleges, though there is no guarantee in such cases that they will be granted any course credit. They are also free to bring their portfolios and scores directly to employers.

Barbara Wright, vice president of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges' Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities, says she is pleased to see the emergence of new portals, especially Learning Counts, that can provide universal, high-quality certifications of workplace learning. But she hopes that employers and employees will bear in mind the limits of certification tests. A single test or portfolio, she says, is unlikely to give a full sense of a student's thinking and writing skills. There are certain kinds of learning that only a full degree program can provide.

To make that point, Ms. Wright draws on her hobby as a gardener. "When I think of myself as a self-trained botanist and naturalist," she says, "I can identify hundreds of wildflowers. But I don't have a larger framework of understanding. I couldn't tell you about some of the more chemical aspects of what makes a flower thrive. I couldn't tell you about their role in an ecosystem. I couldn't tell you about a lot of things, because I'm purely self-taught, and I don't have that larger theoretical and disciplinary framework. That's what going through a formal degree program, validated by an institution, gives you."

Similarly, she suggests, a student who holds a certain kind of Microsoft certification might have strong technical skills but lack the kind of theoretical framework that a full computer-science major might have.

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How to Hire

Precisely that debate, as it happens, used to rage within the offices of Check Solutions, a technology firm co-founded by Joe M. Rowell in 1981. Mr. Rowell himself had not completed a degree, and he didn't much care whether his software engineers had, either. But his deputies, who did most of the direct hiring, tended to insist on bachelor's degrees for new employees.

Today, at the age of 59, Mr. Rowell is finally finishing his own degree.

He isn't doing it for the money. His old firm did well, and he retired comfortably in 2003. But he had promised his late parents that he would finally graduate, and so he enrolled at the University of Memphis's University College, which is one of the Learning Counts pilot institutions.

His first step was to complete a portfolio that would allow him to apply for college credit based on his experience in the workplace. "I thought it would be like résumé-writing on steroids," he says. "But it turned out to be much more complex than that. I had to go back through 20 years of my career and explain how those skills match the courses here and how they reflect college-level learning."

And as he completed that process, Mr. Rowell had a revelation: He should have asked for portfolios like these when he examined job candidates at his company. "This kind of thing would be extremely useful in the workplace," he says. "I really think this could be a new paradigm."

With portfolios like those, he says, he could have won the old arguments about whether degrees were necessary. At the same time he wishes that he had completed his own degree earlier. In Memphis's courses, he says, he is learning principles of management and communication that would have served him well.

Dan Lattimore, dean of Memphis's University College, says Learning Counts will vastly expand his institution's ability to assess adult students' workplace learning. The college has offered such services since 1975, but the standardized process and the national panel of evaluators provided by Learning Counts should allow the college to triple its volume, from roughly 35 students per year to more than 100, he says.

Does Mr. Lattimore expect that Learning Counts will someday lead students to present their skills directly to employers, forgoing degree programs?

Time will tell, he says, but he expects that his institution will play an important role whether or not students want to complete degrees. Workers at FedEx, a major local employer, are offered tuition reimbursement for courses they take in Mr. Lattimore's program. Perhaps someday, he speculates, they will be offered promotions if they complete a specific short sequence of courses and add certain elements to their Learning Counts portfolios.

Ms. Wright, of the Western Association, says colleges need to be humble. "If we're going to be truly student-centered," she says, "it's the learning outcomes that really matter. As hard as it sometimes is for colleges to hear it, we're only a means to an end."