Beyond the Transcript: The Need to Showcase More

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Beyond the Transcript:
The Need to Showcase More

By Gabriele Wienhausen and Kimberly Elias

INTRODUCTION
A university and college education is focused on learning, isn’t it? Looking at the credentials we offer—our degrees, diplomas, and transcripts—the answer is not so clear.

Students at a university or college should take intellectual risks, challenge opinions, and experience diversity. Our credentials however, focus primarily on completing requirements and reporting courses, majors, and grades. What is left out is what and how students learned, and the skills and competencies students acquired within and beyond the classroom.

By highlighting grades, we indicate to students that grades are what is valued. Ask a student what their GPA is, he or she will tell you. Ask a student what transferable skills they developed in their political science class, chances are you will get a blank stare. No wonder the media, legislators, and parents are raising concerns about the value of a degree—students know their grades but have difficulty in articulating the underlying value of their education.

The Need to Showcase More
If we want a university and college education to focus on its purpose—learning—then we need to reframe the way we highlight outcomes. Across the nation and abroad, educational leaders have begun the process of helping students define the value and purpose of their degrees. Specifically, institutions should help students navigate and construct their unique experience and provide innovative ways to help students both reflect on and articulate the range of experiences, knowledge, and competencies that constitute their education. We highlight our University of California San Diego’s Engaged Learning Tools as a model that has provided an integrated and expansive way to document the student experience.

Value of a Degree: Defining Credentials
Why students pursue a degree and what they do afterward with the knowledge and skills they have acquired varies. For some, a bachelor’s degree is a means to catapult them to their next step, such as medical school, law school, or another professional goal. For others, it is a time for personal and career exploration, an opportunity to discover academic, social, and professional interests in hopes of sorting out the path ahead. Accommodating this variation is important in developing new tools for defining the broader value of a degree.

When we talk about credentials, we are talking about the official documentation that a university or college gives students to demonstrate that the student completed defined requirements. Typically, this includes the degree, diploma, and academic transcript. The reason credentials are important is two-fold. First, credentials are a university and college’s currency. They clarify what students have to complete in exchange for a degree. This exchange helps end users (e.g., employers and graduate or professional school admissions officers) have a general sense of the experiences a student

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Kimberly Elias has provided guidance and leadership for the implementing of the Co-Curricular Record (CCR) at the University of Toronto and now at the University of California San Diego. She has conducted research on the CCR and was one of the founders of the Canadian CCR Professionals Network.
had and the knowledge gained during that exchange. Integrity and quality assurance are thus critical, since they uphold the value of the currency in the market. As stewards of an institution’s credentials, the registrar’s office plays a crucial role in upholding the reputation of the institution.

Second, credentials highlight achievements. They document that the student has completed the requirements of the institution—including the subject areas of focus—and has been granted a designation to mark this achievement. The academic transcript takes this one-step further, outlining all of the curricular steps and achievements along the way that culminated into granting the student the degree. In the case of the transcript, the focal point is the grade in each course.

**Highlighting What We Value**

If we value learning and if we want students to value learning, we need to highlight more of what they do and what they have achieved. Currently, our credentials do not adequately reflect the transferable skills that students developed both inside and beyond the classroom. Despite significant institutional investment in co-curricular and experiential learning opportunities, those experiences often lack any official recognition.

At the University of California San Diego, we wanted to highlight what we value: learning. This learning happens within and beyond classroom walls. Therefore we created the Engaged Learning Tools (ELT) to capture the broad range of experiences and skills students develop at our institution.

**In Short**

- Traditional academic credentials have a number of problems. They focus more on grades and achievements than learning. This makes it difficult to help students translate the value of the knowledge, experiences, and skills developed throughout their education to employers and graduate schools.
- There has been a movement across the world to change and expand credentials to better reflect the learning that takes place on our campuses.
- At the University of California San Diego, we are trying to address this problem by showcasing more. We have developed the Engaged Learning Tools, a suite of tools that includes an enhanced electronic transcript, Co-Curricular Record, electronic portfolio, and searchable portal of research and applied learning experiences.

The ELTs include a searchable database of opportunities, the Research Experience Applied Learning Portal, a new integrated student record (Enhanced Electronic Transcript and Co-Curricular Record), and an electronic portfolio tool (Portfolium). Coordinated by the Teaching + Learning Commons, the ELTs were created to help students discover, capture, review, and share their unique university experience. The Teaching + Learning Commons is a comprehensive coordinating unit that is charged with advancing how we teach and learn, and works with campus partners, such as the Registrar’s Office and Career Center, to reframe the way we highlight what we value through the ELTs.

**Navigating the Maze, Documenting the Journey**

Higher education institutions offer myriad rich and valuable experiences with which students can engage outside of the classroom. From athletics, to leadership and mentorship opportunities, to community service and the arts—there is no shortage of opportunities.

Before we can highlight involvement in these activities, we need to ensure that students can find opportunities that suit their interests and time constraints. UC San Diego established REAL Portal to help students navigate experiential learning opportunities both on and off the campus. The REAL Portal offers a one-stop shop where students can look for opportunities to work with a faculty member on a research project, obtain an internship, or study abroad. Using a number of filters, students gain access to a curated list of experiential opportunities on and off the campus.

Acknowledging that institutions often have multiple preexisting databases of opportunities, the REAL Portal intentionally did not re-create such catalogs, but instead integrated and drew on these existing resources. Its set-up therefore included working with campus partners to connect to existing systems, so that opportunities could automatically feed into the database.

**Recognizing the Value of Co-Curricular Experiences**

Once co-curricular opportunities are readily accessible, the task remains to help students, their parents and families, faculty, staff, and employers understand the value of these experiences. We often hear students say they cannot get involved because they’ve been told they need to focus on “school work.” Yet, those who facilitate and implement co-curricular programs know that a whole body of literature demonstrates the tangible value of these experiences. Alexander Astin’s Involvement Theory (1999), Arthur Chickering’s Theory of Identity Development (1969), and Vincent Tinto’s Retention Theory (1987) are just some of the frameworks that highlight the positive impact of student engagement on retention, academic success, and student learning and development.
At UC San Diego, we have recently launched the Co-Curricular Record (CCR)—an official, validated record of co-curricular experiences and the competencies and skills developed. When we say “co-curricular,” we are referring to opportunities that are connected to the institution, occur beyond the classroom, and foster intentional learning and development. While some people call these extracurricular opportunities, higher education institutions have started to use the term “co-curricular,” to acknowledge that it should be seen as part of, rather than outside, the curricular experience (Elias, 2014).

Signed by the Registrar, the CCR highlights the name of the opportunity, student position, short description, and up to three competencies developed as a result (from a list of twelve developed by the institution; see Figure 1). Working with our CCR vendor (Orbis Communications Inc.) and our transcript production vendor (Parchment), students can now request their official Co-Curricular Record with their academic transcript.

Each opportunity has been vetted by a committee to ensure it meets institutional criteria, and a staff or faculty member validates each student engagement upon completion. There is a wide range of opportunities included on the record, captured under four categories: research/academic life; student engagement/campus life; professional/career development; and community-based/global learning.

The CCR is intended to demonstrate in a broader way the value of a UC San Diego degree. Students can use the CCR to find opportunities on campus, keep track of their experiences, and reflect on the skills they developed. Students can then also use the CCR to help them write their resume, applications, or personal statements, and they can submit it when applying to jobs or graduate/professional programs.

Those who are skeptical often ask about the utility of the CCR in the labor market. Yet 77% of employers said they would be very likely or likely to review a CCR in the hiring process, (Elias, 2014), and 71% of employers indicated they “would definitely want” or “prefer to have” one included in the job application (Bryan, Mann, Nelson & North, 1981; Elias, 2014). Employers look for skills, and these records help employers directly see what skills students have developed, while knowing that these experiences have also been verified by the institution.

However, it is important to note that the CCR serves more than employability. It highlights what we value, providing important information for students, their parents, and families. We want our students to come to UC San Diego knowing that education is more than a means to an end (e.g. grad school, employment) and that we will support their growth both inside and outside the classroom.

**BEYOND THE ABBREVIATION: SHOWCASING THE DETAILS**

In addition to generating a Co-Curricular Record, we have made innovative enhancements to the UC San Diego academic transcript (see Figure 2).

The academic transcript is traditionally brief, capturing just the abbreviated course title, grade, and major/minor. As a registrar once stated at a conference, one of the reasons why our transcript is so limited is because we had to keep them short so we could store the records. Now that we have

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**Figure 1.**

- **Research Assistant PSYC 99 or 199 (Geriatric Hoarding Lab VA)**
  - UC San Diego: Clinical Psychology
- **Web based programming of macromolecular structure analysis tool**
  - UC San Diego: Skaggs Schol of Pharmacy & Pharmaceutical Sciences
- **Research**
  - UC San Diego: School of Medicine
- **Independent Studies BISP199**
  - UC San Diego: School of Medicine
- **Neural regeneration lab; image analyses with computer software**
  - UC San Diego: Neurosciences

**Type of Position:** Research  
**Compensation:** Academic Credit  
**Location:** UCSD  
**Apply By:** 01/10/2020

**Opportunity/Position Function:** Research/Analysis

**Opportunity/Position Description:** BISP199 undergraduate researcher to join a neuroscience lab that studies neural regeneration after spinal cord injury in genetic mouse models. We are currently seeking a student with computer science background/expertise to work on 3D image analyses with software. Student Responsibilities: 12 hours/week, 3 quarter minimum commitment. Typically, students work with genetically modified mice, perform DNA preparation, PCR, brain and spinal cord tissue dissection, histology/immunohistochemistry, behavioral assays and aspects of experimental spinal cord injury.
technology and electronic transcripts, the possibilities are endless (Black, 2017).

At UC San Diego, we recently launched the enhanced electronic transcript, a secure PDF that embeds contextual data into the electronic document, so that end users can read the course description, instructor name and contact information, and grade distribution for the section. Furthermore, there is an opportunity to include even more information—about high impact practices, instructor biographies, course syllabi, and learning outcomes. Providing these details may help further shift the focus on what was learned beyond the grade.

Augmenting the transcript to include more information is a major step, but it can only go so far. This is where electronic portfolios may be able to help bridge the gap. While the transcript and CCR can act as the official validated credentials, an electronic portfolio can bring those records to life, as well as highlight other professional and personal achievements.

An online portfolio provides students with the space to upload artifacts, allowing them to demonstrate in a concrete way the competencies/skills they have developed (Chau & Chang, 2010; Hewett, 2004; Lumsden, 2007; Eynon and Gamblino, 2016). For example, a student can upload a video of what they built in their engineering class, display a lesson plan from the workshop they facilitated as a student leader, and highlight a project they worked on in their part-time job.

To this end, we launched an electronic portfolio tool (Portfolium). We encourage students to upload their artifacts, while tagging those experiences with the competencies and skills they developed. In their portfolio, students can upload their CCR, resume, and other items—which they can then share with employers by giving their unique Portfolium link (portfolium.com/royce).

**Skills Gap or Gap in Articulation?**

One of the overarching goals of the Engaged Learning Tools is to help students reflect on and articulate the competencies and skills they developed inside and beyond the classroom. These are utilized as pedagogical tools to help students articulate the transferable nature of their education. As we discussed earlier, students often have a difficult time identifying the transferable value of their degree, since the primary output does not highlight their knowledge, experiences, and skills. This is especially true when we look at students’ ability to discuss the value of their co-curricular engagement.

In a survey with 110 employers, 4% said that students/recent graduates do an “excellent” job at describing the competencies and skills they developed in co-curricular experiences, and 61% of respondents selected “satisfactory” or “needs improvement.” We know these co-curricular experiences are valuable in helping students develop transferable skills. Yet if a student has a hard time articulating their value, and an employer doesn’t know what that experience is, then the assumption is that the student does not have those skills.

As an example, consider a student working as a resident advisor (RA). He or she is responsible for a range of issues facing dorm residents, including personal crises, roommate...
On the academic side, we are assisting faculty to integrate the electronic portfolio into their classes, so that students can showcase their assignments and tag them by the competencies and skills they developed.

conflicts, and academic struggles. RA’s are routinely called upon to assist students dealing with anxiety, depression, eating disorders, or alcohol poisoning. On top of this, RA’s are responsible for understanding and upholding college policies and procedures and for fostering a positive community on their floor. All this offers a powerful learning experience. However, if the student cannot articulate the value of that experience, the assumption is the student has not developed those skills.

More broadly, we have wondered if the skills gap that is often reported by employers is instead a gap in articulation of skills. Through initiatives like UC San Diego’s Engaged Learning Tools, we hope to answer this question. On our campus, we have begun working with academic advisors and career educators to discuss the ways in which the tools can be integrated into conversations and workshops around documenting the value of these experiences. Similarly, on the academic side, we are assisting faculty to integrate the electronic portfolio into their classes, so that students can showcase their assignments and tag them by the competencies and skills they developed. Finally, we are working with community partners to highlight internships and service experiences beyond the institution.

The goal: help students reflect on and articulate their experiences, knowledge, and competencies they have developed. What they do with their materials in their portfolio and CCR depends on their goals. Some students may utilize their portfolio to demonstrate concrete projects, while others may submit their transcript and CCR when applying to graduate school. Each student experience is distinctive, and we want to showcase that.

The Movement

Beyond our institution, many others have also been implementing and adapting various innovative models for credentialing. In the United States, nationwide leaders in these conversations include the Lumina Foundation’s Connecting Credentials Network and the Parchment Summit on Innovating Academic Credentials.

One of the most prominent initiatives focused on credentials has been the Comprehensive Student Record Project (CSR) led by the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRO), the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA), and the Lumina Foundation. The CSR project works with 12 pilot institutions, which represent a variety of institution types, to highlight and develop models in innovating credentials. The initiatives range from competency-based transcripts, to highlighting learning outcomes and developing a record of co-curricular involvement. From Elon University’s Experience Transcript to University of Maryland University College’s Competency-Based Transcript, the goal is to create models that other institutions can tailor and adapt to their contexts (AACRAO, 2016).

Similar efforts are happening across the world. In Canada, over 180 colleagues from over 70 universities and colleges came together in 2012 to develop the Canadian Co-Curricular Recognition (CCR) Professionals Network. The network was created as a way to further CCRs in Canada through hosting national and regional meetings, sharing resources, and developing communications and guidelines/standards (Drea & Elias, 2013). While institutional differences are inevitably leading to variations among CCRs, Canadian institutions are working together to coordinate efforts, developing a formal community of practice through the Canadian Association of College and University Student Services (CACUSS, 2017).

Outside North America, similar initiatives have been developed, including Australia’s Queensland University of Technology’s Co-Curricular Record (2016), National University of Singapore’s Co-Curricular Activities Certificate (http://nus.edu.sg/osa/services/co-curricular-activities-certific ate.html), and University of Fraser Valley’s Co-Curricular Record at their India campus (2016).

These are just a few examples of the many institutions entering the space of developing new forms of university and college credentials to make them more meaningful for the student and end users, and to better reflect the experiences, knowledge, and skills students develop.

Conclusion

The undergraduate experience should be a time for students to think critically about ideas, challenge their assumptions, learn in a diverse context, and develop skills and competencies that will help them in their steps following graduation. Higher education institutions provide a suite of learning opportunities for students to do this both inside and outside of the classroom.

However, since most of our transcripts focus mainly on grades achieved, students inevitably place a lot of emphasis on striving for a strong GPA. If we want to reframe the educational experience so that students focus on their
learning and the competencies developed, then we need to change the credentials we offer to be more robust in what they highlight.

UC San Diego’s Engaged Learning Tools offer an innovative solution to connect students with opportunities and capture their experiences in and outside of the classroom. They can then use these tools to reflect on and share with employers and graduate/professional schools their work and achievements.

As a sector, if we want to demonstrate the value of a university and college degree, we need to think critically about the “currency” we offer and produce credentials that are more meaningful for those who read them. If we focus on the critical skills students are learning and developing, then students will be better able to articulate the value of their degree, and employers and graduate/professional schools will have a more robust understanding of what a student can offer.

Resources