

Building Course Exchanges

Commentary

By Phil Hill and O'Neal Spicer, Published October 6, 2016

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Three years ago, the [California Community College system](#) was on the verge of an existential crisis.

Decades of budget cuts resulted in capacity constraints that were at odds with the system's open enrollment mission. Student access to critical courses was limited, and portability was stymied by the lack of interoperability among institutions that needed to collaborate in the interest of student success.

While some argued that a parallel system of MOOCs, unbundled course and third-party operators should step-in, the state opted to re-invest in its existing faculty and infrastructure. At the heart of what became known as the [Online Education Initiative](#) (OEI) was a system for an [online course exchange](#) that could help to improve access to courses that were oversubscribed or not available at local campuses.

California was not alone in making the move toward a system where a consortium of campuses pooled resources to offer online courses for students across multiple campuses. North Carolina has done so, as has Colorado and Mississippi and several others. Part of the attraction of course exchanges comes from the acknowledgement that with online education, the campus walls do not need to be an artificial barrier.

But the creation of course exchange is not trivial. You cannot just "throw a course online and let them in." Courses need consistent standards and course numbering, they must be available to students at each campus for course planning and enrollment, and results must be reported back to student record systems.

Already yielding results

What we are seeing in California is a holistic approach to creating the infrastructure necessary to create course exchanges. While the actual California exchange opens in January 2017, the infrastructure investment is already creating dividends. And it may be that, in the end, these dividends prove to be of even greater value than the exchange itself.

Some of the key infrastructure includes an adapter for student record systems, a common course management system, professional development and support for faculty, and student support services.

Adapter

As the OEI team mapped out what it would take for its course exchange project to work efficiently for students and campus administrators, it became clear that all the complexities of cross-campus registration and articulation needed to be handled behind the scenes. No one wanted to force students to apply to a new college, enroll and then fill out registration papers. Such a sclerotic process would be a put-off to students, a headache for administrators and a deal breaker for the course exchange.

To solve this problem, the team from the technology center at [Butte College](#) proposed and is currently implementing what they're calling [Project Glue](#). When we spoke with Lou Delzompo, CTO of the center, he said that this integration project had been loosely conceived some time ago, but there was little urgency or immediate problem to be solved. As Lou put it, "Architecture without a project to drive it will fail."

OEI and the course exchange changed all of that and Project Glue is now in full swing.

At its most basic level, Project Glue provides an adapter layer that allows isolated administrative systems such as student information systems to talk to each other for the first time. There is also a connective layer that is allowing these systems to talk directly to applications. (Canvas, the common course management system adopted by OEI, is an example of one of those applications.) Project Glue is also providing a means for standardizing and modelling data that can be used to streamline business operations and guide strategic decision-making. Enrollment and student success data that used to require manual entry can now be automated and accessed close to real time.

One benefit of using an "adapter" is that each campus still owns its own systems. No massive ERP system replacement needed. And Project Glue will provide them with the dials and knobs to control how information travels back and forth into their systems.

Common course management

Early on, the OEI steering committee recognized the potential benefits of encouraging the adoption of a common course management across the state. There were potential cost saving due to the large size of the adoption. At a more basic level, having everyone on the same system creates the opportunity to scale a common set of support services and a shared understanding of effective pedagogy.

After selecting [Canvas by Instructure](#), the OEI team was able to offer financial incentives for campuses to switch to Canvas. They also did a very effective road show to get buy in for a platform that gets great marks for ease of use and flexibility. More than 90 of the 113 campuses in the California system are in some stage of adoption of the Canvas platform.

Professional development

Professional development efforts have been a critical part of the OEI initiative. They focus on training and support for both teaching online and for developing online courses. As of this summer, 432 faculty members representing 79 community colleges have attended the Introduction to Teaching in Canvas workshops sponsored by OEI. Another 1,314 have registered for the training session in the next few months. OEI has also launched a train the trainer program that 132 people have completed.

For online course development, OEI has developed a rigorous course design rubric and is busy training faculty across the state. To date, 400 faculty members have received training in the OEI Course Design Standards, 60 faculty members are prepared to be online course peer reviewers and 97 faculty have participated in the peer online course review.

Student support services

Student support is another area where OEI is building a suite of online services to provide a foundation for student success. One of the key components is an online readiness course, [Quest for Online Success](#) that prepares students for taking courses online. It is offered on the Canvas platform and has been accessed by 4,080 students since it became available earlier this summer.

A self-diagnostic that is a part of the course has been taken by 1,380 students. Additional services available to students include online counseling and online tutoring. For the online counseling, OEI selected the Cranium Cafe platform and 60 counselors so far have been trained to provide counseling online to students, and that program is just ramping up. All of these faculty and student support services are available to anyone using the Canvas CCMS and are not restricted to courses offered through the Course Exchange pilot effort.

Taken together, these infrastructure investments are important pieces for any statewide system or consortium looking to offer course exchanges. But as we're starting to see in California that infrastructure can have an even bigger impact at the campus level for quality online education offerings aimed at helping students get degrees.

Preliminary indicators from the Research and Planning Group for the California Community Colleges suggest that these investments are increasing online course success rates. OEI pilot colleges are posting an online course success rate of 69 percent, which compares favorably to the statewide success rate of 65 percent. It's too early to make definitive conclusions, but these indicators show what the ultimate goal should be — improving student success — and that we may be on to some big changes.

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