Using ‘open’ to create a new, innovative higher education model
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Abstract
Open College at Kaplan University (OC@KU) is an innovative higher education model that integrates open courses, technology, and learning patterns into an individualized learning path. As a learning concierge service, OC@KU helps learners meet their career, academic, and personal goals.

Key Words
Personalized, open access, individual learning plan, prior learning

Introduction
Navigating learning, formal or informal, can be overwhelming, confusing, and impersonal. There are more options than ever, so the process of deciding what, where, and when can be overwhelming. Confusion occurs when products and services are disbursed without instructions or directions to help the learner navigate the maize. The last, but certainly not least, learning tends to be dictated to the learner instead of by the learner thus the lack of personalization. The concept of Open College at Kaplan University (OC@KU) was to address the barriers that learners face by placing all of the products and services under one roof so-to-speak, incorporate open resources, and to put the learner in control.

With a rich history and success in the delivery of online education, Kaplan University also continuously seeks opportunities to innovate. OC@KU was an opportunity to make a distinctive footprint in higher education by addressing significant barriers to access but also incorporating new, innovative open resources.

OC@KU represents a myriad of ways that learning can be supported in the era of abundant information. On the other hand, we think OC@KU is a terrific new approach to supporting personalized learning. It is ultimately flexible, aligning specific learning path points to the identified needs of the unique learner. Finally and importantly, however, OC@KU represents a method, an approach to thinking about learning environments and learning support in the 21st century. OC@KU represents the power of technology and open resources to increase the personalization and quality of both informal and formal higher education while reducing cost and price.

OC@KU, the concept.
Focused on supporting and providing a personalized education experience, several years ago, a small group of people at Kaplan University began to meet around the concept of creating a college for the future. As we developed the concept, we found ourselves imagining a college that adapted its resources and services to the needs of the learner, whether the needs included a degree, informal learning, assessments or some combination of all three. We wanted a college that met a learner’s needs without requiring admission as the price of participation. Rather than just co-opting the language, we wanted a college that was truly learning- and learner-centric.

At the same time, a trifecta of circumstances and events were occurring in higher education that was effecting learning in higher education: technology, supply and demand, and the rising cost of education.

Improvements in technology have made it possible to make learning opportunities available anytime, anywhere. And as the emergence of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) amply demonstrates, terrific content is readily available at low cost or for free. Place-based education, the campus, becomes an
option, not a necessity. An important part of this change is its financial consequence. Technology creates a whole new level of access.

In a world of accelerating change in the workplace, there is a growing gap between the number of people with the skills needed for entry into the workforce and the number of jobs requiring those skills. Employers are unable to hire the people they need because colleges are not graduating them in sufficient numbers with the skills needed. This gap between the supply and demand of skilled workers drives the search for and attractiveness of new ways of validating knowledge and skills, like assessing experiential learning.

Simultaneously, colleges are experiencing dramatically rising prices. Again, the pressure for lower cost, more effective educational models, including assessment of experiential learning is seen as part of the solution (Author & Author, 2013).

As a result, Open College at Kaplan University (OC@KU) was launched in the fall of 2014, after a year of experimentation with developing and delivering open courses. OC@KU offers a dramatically new way of approaching traditional education as we know it. As a sense-making venture, OC@KU combines no-risk, self-paced, open-access, and relevant courses with the opportunity to earn college credit in a one-stop environment, a technologically supported and andrologically appropriate learning hub. As an extraordinary driver of change, the broadening of the internet has been a driver in how content, information, and learning is accessed and delivered; today access to resources and information is like no other time in history. We wanted a college that embraced and utilized the benefits of the new information environment.

When it comes to harnessing the power of the internet to meet educational and career needs, the process can be as offensive and confusing as it is difficult. We likened the unharnessed information on the internet to a blizzard and the unsupported user trying to organize it to a skier without goggles in that blizzard. Hence, we developed the concept of developing and offering free sense-making services. These services addressed organizing and understanding prior learning, career investigation, and the curation of informal learning as the preliminary steps to identifying a learning path forward that could be followed informally, with individual assessments, or in a degree program. To that we have added low cost diagnostics as well.

Open courses then and now.
Since of the launch of the first OpenCourseWare project in 2002, tens of thousands of open courses have been developed and offered in multiple forms. They have succeeded in meeting multiple needs in ways that were as unanticipated as they are diverse. We believe that the core characteristics of just-in-time, affordable learning, and self-managed learning are the primary reasons why open educational resources have grown in popularity. But they also represent a new asset for lifelong learners, formal and informal, all over the world. When they are coupled with curation services, technologies, and assessments, open educational resources are the springboard to organized high quality learning that meets the personal needs of the individual learner.

Built on a proprietary platform, OC@KU uses technology to bring together the use of open courses, assessments, and other learning resources to provide learners with a customized learning path. Looking at traditional education through the new lens of open, OC@KU offers learners the opportunity of an individualized, affordable education that integrates technology, open resources, and personalized services to help them meet their career, academic, and personal goals. While this may sound like business as usual, it is not. While most of the language is not new, OC@KU is actually a unique development within the realm of higher education. The result of creating and organizing a one-stop shop for all things ‘open,’ OC@KU puts learners in charge of their learning, formal or informal. In an era in which curricula is
easily accessible, OC@KU provides a manner in which learners can create, organize, and make sense of their learning.

As such, OC@KU is an example of a wholly new definition of access. Beyond the actual availability of thousands of courses and services, physical access if you will, OC@KU offers access to personalized learning paths. It is a learning concierge service that puts higher education in an entirely new dimension, removing the barriers between career advancement and education. OC@KU encourages learners to chart their own paths using assessments to recognize learning, however acquired, for academic and career value.

In addition to offering free, open courses developed in-house, other resources are also available for free or at a low cost. Realizing that one size does not fit all and that learners have varying needs, OC@KU provides a suite of services that learners can use to customize their learning. 

Equally important, as part of this technological and web-driven disruption, learners’ capacity to develop and store evidence of learning in electronic portfolios - carefully organized around career, academic, or personal interests - has also been transformed, as stated by the founding president of OC@KU, Dr. Peter Smith in a recent Educause article (Author, 2014). Learners can use the open courses to learn for the sake of learning, or, if a more formal goal is desired, apply their learning toward a degree.

To date, we have developed and placed the following suite of services in this personalized learning concierge service:

- **Open Portfolio.** The Open Portfolio is a tool that allows learners to create a free Open Portfolio to help them track and manage their open courses. Built with an integrated API for Open Education Consortium courses, the Open Portfolio is free for users to develop learning plans around personal or professional interests. We believe that the open portfolio will allow individual learners to curate their informal learning, organizing it for better understanding and improved future use in career, personal and academic decisions. This has the added advantage of helping people remember what they have learned. Acting as a “learning journal,” the open portfolio becomes a powerful tool, not simply a passive repository. [www.openlearningportfolio.com](http://www.openlearningportfolio.com)

- **LearningAdvisor.** LearningAdvisor is a free, comprehensive search tool that connects learners with thousands of open courses. This rigorous tool allows users to search for courses by subject, institution, or interest. Created for integration with the American Association of Retired People’s (AARP) Life Reimagined program, LearningAdvisor is focused on life transitions be they from job to job, career to retirement, and any other combination of events. [www.learningadvisor.com/courses](http://www.learningadvisor.com/courses).

- **StraighterLine.** StraighterLine provides first and second year general education courses that have been evaluated and recommended for college credit by the American Council on Education. As an OC@KU course partner, any of the courses from StraighterLine can be applied toward a degree at OC@KU. [www.straighterline.com](http://www.straighterline.com)

- **CareerJourney.** Learners have free access to CareerJourney, a self-paced course that was developed in partnership with LinkedIn, using their rich data base for career planning. In a game-like environment, CareerJourney provides practical strategies to identify strengths, explore career opportunities, network with like-professionals, and to create a professional development plan. CareerJourney also includes the ability to match skill gaps to courses. [www.Careerjourney.com](http://www.Careerjourney.com)

- **CLA+.** CLA+ is a low cost skills assessment tool. For a minimal fee, learners can take an assessment that will evaluate real-life, cross-cutting intellectual skills. The skills that CLA+ test
for include analysis and problem solving, scientific and quantitative reasoning, critical reading and evaluation, and critiquing an argument. These are the skills which employers have overwhelmingly stated matter more to them than a particular major or GPA. Our objective in partnering with CLA+ is to provide evidence for learners and employers that the individual is ready to work effectively. www.takeclaplus.com

- **Learning Recognition Course (LRC100).** As the first open course developed by OC@KU, the LRC100 guides individuals through the process of documenting their training and experience in a portfolio which is evaluated by university faculty for college-level credit. The LRC100 is free and self-paced with personal support provided by assessment specialist that have many years of experience with adult learners. As a sense-making offering, the portfolio is a curation of the individual’s prior learning, experience, and informal learning.

**The multi-faceted goal of OC@KU.**
The initial and primary goal is to provide access to no-risk, self-paced, open-access, and relevant courses. The initial goal quickly grew to include resources to help learners in the open environment, the Open Portfolio, Individual Learning Plans, and a degree program. While the idea of open courses is not new nor innovative, the idea of the open courses articulating to a degree program is unique.

The Open Portfolio, a free resource, is a tool that helps learners manage and track open courses. The Open Portfolio also addressed a need; while formal education provides very precise tracking and managing tools, the same doesn’t exist for informal learning.

A different approach was also taken in the creation of a degree program that not only uses open courses, it begins with an Individualized Learning Plan (ILP) allowing the learner, with the guidance of a faculty mentor, to develop a personalized degree path. As the name indicates, the ILP is unique to the learner and includes:
- a career goal statement which enables the student and the faculty advisor to identify potential course assessments and learning options to fulfill the degree requirements that relates to a career,
- a review of previously earned college credit,
- an analysis of previous experience that can be evaluated for college credit so that the learner does not duplicate learning that has already been acquired,
- potential open courses to meet degree requirements, and
- course assessments (credit by exam) to meet the degree program learning outcomes.

**The model of the degree program is unique.**
The uniqueness of the degree includes multiple features; the most outstanding is the fact that learners can use open courses – taken anywhere - to complete their degree requirements. The faculty mentor works with the learner to help them find open courses that have similar course outcomes as their college credit counterpart. OC@KU has also partnered with several open course providers to provide the students with a curated selection of courses to reduce the overwhelming task of searching for open courses.

The learning acquired from the open courses is assessed for college credit in multiple ways, through portfolio assessment, standardized assessments, and challenge exams thus aligning the outcomes with college-level credit. OC@KU has developed course assessments, partnered with Kaplan University as well as external nationally recognized challenge exam providers to be able to offer a wide range of examinations. Successful completion of the challenge exams results in credit awarded by the university.
And, the degree is based on a monthly subscription model rather. The monthly subscription includes access to faculty mentors, assessment advisors, a portfolio assessment (which includes the assessment of up to 15 courses, and open resources curated specifically for the BSPR students.

**Individualized doesn’t have to be lonely.**

The community experience for learners is a vital part of the strategy of OC@KU. Focused on supporting adult learners, creating the community feel and experience is fundamentally necessary and is accomplished through the following strategies.

- Live support and feedback in the courses. Even though the courses are open and self-paced, learners can reach out for live support by phone or email.
- Forums and discussion boards. Faculty are assigned on a rotating schedule to the open courses to be visible, accessible, and to engage the learners in communication.
- Live Seminars using Google+ and YouTube. The Live Seminar is a unique tool that combines video, Google+, and YouTube to add that live component to the open course. Students can see and hear the live lecture and chat with the instructor.

Today’s learners are savvy consumers. They demand consumer elements such as self-management, real-time access, device availability, and socializing in their educational journey. Although the learning environment is open, proven instructional strategies that provide a positive experience are part of the design and delivery of OC@KU.

**To date, the evidence is positive.**

Since the launch of OC@KU in the fall of 2014, the outcome has been beyond our expectation. With little marketing outside word-of-mouth, we’ve seen a tremendous interest in our unique model.

- Approximately 4,000 unique learners have accessed the OC@KU open course web site and have registered for 4,800 courses.
- 104 have submitted prior learning portfolios for assessment.
- Learners have received college credit for 711 courses as a result of the portfolio assessment.

**Conclusion: Looking Forward.**

We understand that OC@KU is only of myriad ways that learning can be supported in the era of abundant information. On the other hand, we think OC@KU is a terrific new approach to supporting learning. It is ultimately flexible, aligning specific learning path points to the identified needs of the unique learner. At the same time, its free and low cost *sense-making* services provide non-judgmental diagnostics and information which assist the learner in personalizing their learning to meet their needs.

Finally and importantly, however, OC@KU represents a *method*, an approach to thinking about learning environments and learning support in the 21st century. As such, it can be used in multiple delivery environments, beyond the exclusive online, self-paced model we have started with. Whether you want to support a weekend college, a different low-residency model, adapt it to groups of learners using the BSPR or other degree programs and individual assessments, use it in a business environment, or put it in a blended environment, the OC@KU method will work effectively. It represents the power of technology and open resources to increase the personalization and quality of both informal and formal higher education while reducing their cost and price.

**References**


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