



Life beyond credit hours

Yes

Commentary

By Allen Goben, Published January 22, 2013



Allen Goben

It was a tremendous internal struggle, deciding whether to put these ideas in writing or not. Ultimately, the need for progress outweighs the inherent caution we so often feel in education when introducing a new or progressive concept—one that is sure to stir the proverbial pot while enlivening loud oppositional voices who find comfort in tradition and slow/incremental/self-directed progress, or those who simply abhor change.

One of the great mysteries of modern times is why a sector that has a deep-seated, DNA-like identity in the moment of change (the learning moment) would have evolved into a culture that is inherently change-resistant. Oxymoronic though it is, this characteristic means that one must be intrepid and resilient to put forth any ideas that might significantly alter a culture primarily comfortable with slow and incremental progress.

I've recently been privy to conversation after conversation at all levels regarding the need for systemic and almost radical progress in education. Our system was built for a different era. It's not a bad thing; it just doesn't fit the needs of our times. We have built an eight-lane expressway into a swamp, and it is time to substantively realign our efforts.

We have upon us a moment of opportunity so rare as to be truly special in all of human history. It is time for us to collectively and collaboratively redesign education for the future rather than continually living in our comfortable structures and processes that were built for yesteryear.

The courage to change

So what is the problem? There are several areas to make quick and meaningful progress, but

none more important, challenging or complex than “blowing up” the credit hour. This made-up and inaccurately structured quantification of learning and the learning environment has anchored our business model for about a century. Speaking directly to people who love tradition and comfortable ways of doing and being... seriously, would Plato or Aristotle have even considered seat time to be a measure of learning? Would Confucius or Socrates? How are people who love tradition defining tradition? Clinging desperately to this relatively new “tradition” makes little sense.

The credit-hour concept is a deep though relatively recent problem, because it has created a structure upon which we depend to operate modern education. Many people do not like it, but few have proposed any worthy alternatives.

Allen Goben will be one of the featured presenters at the [AACC John E. Roueche Future Leaders Institute](#) Feb. 17-22 in Phoenix, Ariz.

Leadership is not just about being bold and identifying problems, though. Anyone in virtually any coffee shop can attest to the fact that nearly everyone can identify problems, both real and imagined. What we need are solutions and, if we do not use the credit hour to anchor our business model, then what should we use? In the past few years I have facilitated a series of meetings with a variety of faculty members, continuing education professionals and leaders from education, business and industry. In many of these meetings, I used a science fiction scenario to have the group describe how they would set up education if they were doing it in an unrestricted way. The groups had to envision colonizing a distant planet. All physical infrastructure was set up, resources were virtually unlimited and the initial colonists including engineers, builders, miners and leaders were about to be joined by families—long-term colonists to set up a bold new world.

A bold new approach

Borrowing a line from Star Trek, I asked the groups to “boldly go where no one has gone before” in terms of education. How would it look? What aspects would it have? How would it be developed, accessed, delivered and maintained? Not one group had any use whatsoever in a credit-hour or seat-time concept. Below is a summary of what they did suggest:

- A full and broad **mapping of learning outcomes** to encompass all of general education and skill sets, then detailed out along all relevant career and societal benefit paths. The base unit for business model operations, if needed, would be the learning outcome rather than the credit hour.
- A resulting structure would include **stackable learning outcomes** that stack into learning modules, courses, certificates, degrees and any other named credentials.
- A robust **learning and prior learning assessment structure** would be developed that would transcript any inherently possessed knowledge and skills while allowing all future learning to expand both. Students who already have certain knowledge or skills would be

allowed to move on to other learning experiences in a very personalized fashion so their time and energy as well as societal resources would be maximized for continual progress.

- If needed, **lower testing fees** would be used to document already-acquired knowledge and skills while comparatively higher fees would be charged for full instruction and instructional support, so that people and organizations offering these services would be able to sustain themselves.
- A thorough **career and interest inventory and advising structure** would fuel all goal setting, planning and monitoring, as well as adjustments in student learning and progress toward eventual career, college and life success.
- A tremendous **mentoring program** would anchor the approach where classroom efforts, lab experiences and self-guided tutorials would be complemented by apprenticeships, internships and one-on-one and/or small group mentoring.
- All of education would be **built around the learner** and learning needs, and this would require a high degree of interaction and personalization as each learner's needs were explored and supported.
- **Traditional educational silos** of liberal arts, career/technical/vocational education, allied health and continuing education **would cease to exist** as all learning would be joined at the base, learning outcome unit.

There are many leadership models and theories, but true leadership conversations often start without comfort. People have to get outside of their time-honored and conditioned experience and responses. They have to break the chains of self-interest and learned response to envision anything truly new and useful. Only then can any leadership approach move our culture beyond incremental progress toward a new era of learner-centered educational excellence that fully serves learners and society.

Goben is president of [Heartland Community College](#) in Illinois.