After working for Cuyahoga Community College in Ohio for over six years, in February 2016 I moved to a new position (and state) to take on a new challenge, at Southern New Hampshire University. Surprisingly, the move from the community college environment to the College of Online and Continuing Education at a private, liberal arts university revealed far more similarities than differences in how to support students as effective online learners.

A Common Mission of Access
One of the primary things that drew me to both institutions—and overall the beauty and the challenge of both environments—is that access to higher education is part of their mission. Students who otherwise might not be able to go to college and obtain a degree have an opportunity because of institutions like these. The mission of Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU) is to transform the lives of our students by “relentlessly challenging the status quo” and creating “high quality, affordable and innovative pathways to meet the unique needs of each and every student.”1 The mission statement of Cuyahoga Community College (Tri-C) similarly focuses on its purpose to “provide high quality, accessible and affordable educational opportunities and services.”

This mission—though institutionally unique—presents common challenges for how to design online learning to effectively support students who are largely nontraditional students balancing many priorities, often including family and work.

Fighting with Legacy Systems
In both environments, a common challenge is wrestling with legacy technology systems. Often, business processes grew alongside the systems to mitigate the technology challenges. Engagement with content, with fellow students, and with faculty is often limited by the constraints of technical systems. The management of content—from files to videos to interactive materials—can be difficult. Content is hosted in multiple places, and the technology systems necessary to effectively manage content (and measure the effectiveness of such materials) are not yet operationalized at most institutions.

Both the community college and the private university need content management. Hosting files is one step, but ensuring that content has appropriate management—with version control, responsiveness for mobile delivery, and tracking for student usage—goes a step beyond. Most colleges host instructional content in a variety of locations, which provides little in terms of actionable information for how to improve student learning. Data collection in such environments is a challenge. What is needed is a true Learning Object Repository or robust Content Management System, where information on student interactions with which versions of what content can be tracked and used to revise the learning design for students.

Transitioning legacy systems to more modern environments can be as much about how to utilize the system as it is about the system functionality itself. Limitations that existed in legacy systems years ago necessitated many layers of workarounds to help mitigate the challenges, and as technology develops, many of those workarounds persist. Disassembling the existing business process to take advantage of newer functionality can be disruptive but is often necessary.

Moving to Interoperability First
Both institutional environments—the community college and the private university—face the challenge of transitioning to a Next Generation Digital Learning Environment where interoperability is front and center.1 At Cuyahoga Community College, online and hybrid course design and development was driven by individual faculty members, and as a result, what is integrated into the system is both limited and limiting. When there are publishers’ materials that are preferred for instructional value, those materials have longer staying power in the system than is necessarily advisable. Copying courses can result in multiple versions of the same dense content that may not be integrated—or that perhaps should not be integrated.

Integrating building blocks into Blackboard, or utilizing LTI (Learning Tools Interoperability), requires functional testing and then implementation in approved upgrade windows in both environments. Empowering institutions to ask for—and then effectively integrate—standards-based resources and experiences requires a different type of partnership with both content-based and technology-based vendors. The IMS Global Learning Consortium (https://www.imsglobal.org/) is rapidly making progress with open standards, and it is up to the institutions that serve students to require adherence to standards.

Even among colleges and universities with large online enrollments, Southern New Hampshire University is unique in the way in which it partners with publishers. This relationship is enabled by the master course model, wherein faculty and Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) work with instructional designers, academic leaders, and content architects to centrally
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When learning resources are selected in a holistic manner, the institution has the opportunity to work more closely with publishers over time. By contrast, in the community college environment that I experienced, adoption of learning resources would occur at the departmental or campus level. When individual publisher reps work with a single faculty member or a department, oftentimes the coordination for integrating resources in order to get good data on student performance with those materials is lacking or not even considered. Discovering the effectiveness of learning resources for large numbers of students becomes even more challenging in this disaggregated environment.

Effective Online Student Support

Online support structures vary between environments as well. Whereas both types of institutions utilize online tutoring and both have writing support for students, how that support is deployed differs. SNHU has an innovative advising model. Data is regularly drawn from the LMS: if students miss an assignment or fall behind in class, their advisor and faculty intervene early and often. Few campus-based community colleges are well-positioned to scale intervention support for online students in this way.

Some colleges and universities—even those dedicated to open access—expect that students will reach out when they need help; institutional leaders assume that students understand internal college or university structures. Though this is beginning to change with intrusive advising and outreach to students at many community colleges, sometimes the ability of students to utilize support services depends on students finding and coordinating that support themselves. Sometimes, students even self-advise on courses and program selection—a mediocre idea at best.

Core Ecosystem Functionality Needs

Another commonality between the community college and private university environments is that there are some standard needs for learning and support. Though institutions vary in their place on the spectrum between legacy systems and new innovative systems, all have gaps in functionality and tools. Beyond the LMS, core learning technology need areas include the following:

- Learning Object Repository or Content Management System
- Video streaming
- Mobile-first ability for institutionally or faculty-designed resources and interactions
- Synchronous interaction (video, chat)
- Contemporary asynchronous interaction (video, discussion boards, audio and video feedback)
- Systemic communication tools (texting, apps, alerts)
- Effective data dashboards and data warehouses with effective data flow
- Automatic notifications for students, faculty, and advisors
- Curriculum management system
- Adaptive learning (engine, publisher system, or other)
- Competency-based education (tools, systems)
- Tutoring, writing, and other support systems
- Student-to-student social engagement and support outside of courses
- Placement tools, remediation, and just-in-time resources
- Proctoring for assessments, and multifaceted authentication for academic integrity
- Library and research resources integrated into the LMS

A Common Challenge

To support the new majority of students—often older, working, and with families—community colleges and private universities face a common challenge: the need to find ways to evolve their learning technology systems. Students expect a more consumer-grade experience with technology, and colleges and universities will need to meet those expectations. More learners have access to higher education than ever before, but that access is meaningful only when all tools available to them are deployed to support their success. Learning technologies are the tools that can provide our students with that best chance at success. And student success is the business we are in—together.

Notes


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