

POV: Transparency by Design: Stepping Into the Light

Monday, September 21, 2009 - By Linda M. Thor, President, Rio Salado College

Increasingly, we live in a transparent society where openness is expected and accountability is demanded. The word “transparency” is associated with seeing things more clearly when cast in the proper light. A Google search for the word produces more than 25 million links devoted to its practice in medicine, high tech, real estate, fiscal policy and just about every other industry or ideology. Even President Barack Obama’s campaign web site promoted a platform of “restoring trust in government and improving transparency.”

Applied to higher education, transparency demonstrates that institutions are willing to step into the light of public scrutiny by providing current and future students with solid data. But until recently, online learning providers who serve non-traditional student populations have not had a collaborative means to showcase their learning outcomes.

That has changed with the launch of Transparency by Design, a groundbreaking initiative that will transform adult learners into savvy consumers when it comes to distance education and competency-based programs of study. The initiative’s public and private members comprise a consortium of regionally-accredited distance education institutions. Transparency by Design was born out of The President’s Forum, which is a group of both traditional and non-traditional institutions sharing information about successful operation in an online environment.

WCET, a division of the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE), was chosen to provide quality assurance, overseeing the validation and verification of the data reported.

What is also different about this initiative is that it includes program-specific outcomes. Current and potential students can visit the recently launched website at www.collegechoicesforadults.org, click on any of the affiliated institutions, and review outcomes for fields of study and degree programs that interest them. No standardized method of measurement has been adopted by participants; however, the information itself is transparent. It typically reveals factors such as demographics, student engagement and alumni satisfaction.

The following are five reasons why joining an initiative such as Transparency by Design makes good sense for community colleges:

First, transparency leads to open and informed decision-making. Community colleges are, by definition, colleges of and for the people. Transparency acknowledges that individuals have more options than ever before when selecting their college of first choice. Remember, this is the era of Facebook and MySpace, Twitter and texting. More than 50 percent of social media users are adults over the age of 25 who choose to divulge details of their lives to people they may never even meet. For them, it’s all about building community, and it is natural to expect this same openness from their educational providers.

Second, accountability should begin internally. Entities such as the Spellings Commission have established expectations for both public and private colleges and universities to highlight learning outcomes. However, self-policing is always the preferable route. The commitment to expose program-level learning outcomes takes courage — but it also demonstrates a college or university that takes responsibility for continuous improvement and academic quality and rigor.

Third, community colleges can demonstrate leadership in establishing industry standards. Community colleges need to shoulder more responsibility for transparency and accountability because they represent the largest sector of higher education providers. They are essentially teaching and learning institutions and should not falter in sharing their often-overlooked successes and effectiveness.

Fourth, collaboration benefits everyone. The information from Transparency by Design participants can pave the way for the success of other major higher education initiatives. The most recent example is President Obama's American Graduation Initiative to increase community college graduation rates and close achievement gaps. Another example is the Lumina Foundation's goal to increase the proportion of Americans with high-quality degrees and credentials to 60 percent by the year 2025.

Finally, transparency leads to self-improvement. Transparency invites comparison, and therefore sharpens our management skills as we confront questions about our identity. Are we truly who we say we are in our websites and literature? How well do we deliver the promises made in those marketing campaigns? Progress can only be achieved when areas of improvement are identified.

As a non-traditional institution serving primarily adult learners, my college, Rio Salado, became the nation's first community college to commit to Transparency by Design. I urge my colleagues with distance learning programs to visit www.transparencybydesign.org, engage in dialogue with the charter members and then consider joining our ranks.

Comments: editor@ccweek.com

Linda M. Thor has served as president of Rio Salado College since 1990. The college served 36,000 distance learning students last year out of a total student population of nearly 60,000.