

The Comprehensive Learner Record

Scenario

Reuben Montoya, university registrar at O’Leary University, has seen growing dissatisfaction in recent years with his institution’s traditional transcript. Alumni and employers alike tell him that conventional transcripts seem outmoded and don’t really tell HR offices what they want to know about job candidates. As an HR officer at a company that hires a steady stream of O’Leary graduates recently told Montoya, “Sure, the transcript tells me whether candidates have a degree, but not necessarily what skills they have.”

At a recent conference, Montoya heard colleagues present ideas about alternatives to the transcript. Several universities are developing versions of a Comprehensive Learner Record, or CLR. Rather than focus on credit hours earned by students completing courses, CLRs seek to document the learning outcomes and competencies a student has mastered. Inspired, Montoya decides to develop his own CLR at O’Leary.

Iterating ideas over several months, Montoya and his colleagues develop a version of a CLR that is organized by learning outcomes aligned with areas that reflect O’Leary’s educational philosophy and a framework the team chose, [NACE Career Ready Competencies](#). Courses, experiences such as internships, and participation in student organizations, research, and global study are presented in the CLR as evidence of those outcomes. Documentation for a student internship, for example, includes detail about the company that sponsored the program and the specific tasks the intern was asked to complete. Building this tool calls for significant collaboration among O’Leary’s faculty, learning designers, and staff in IT and student affairs. Integrating the relevant data needed to populate the CLR with data and evidence of learning requires a great deal of creativity and perseverance in creating new channels for merging data, new workflows, and the needed technological infrastructure.

The results validate the hard work that Montoya led. O’Leary now gives graduates both a traditional transcript and a CLR in digital form. Both stand as official, authentic, and verifiable university documents. Alumni report great success in using their CLRs for admission to graduate school and for showing potential employers what they know and can do. When Montoya and his staff surveyed a sample of HR directors, they were universally enthusiastic about O’Leary’s CLR. It recently won an award for “most promising innovation” from a higher education association, and Montoya has been asked to join a national collaborative that is working to develop the CLR.

1 What is it?

Digital student records are evolving in ways that more fully document student achievements. One such form is the Comprehensive Learner Record (CLR), a digital asset that helps students both better understand their learning and share a verifiable record of their knowledge and accomplishments. With a learner’s consent, the CLR gathers data about performance beyond just course grades, with an ultimate goal of [capturing, recording, and communicating learning](#) when and where it happens across a student’s higher education experience. Thus, a CLR can include a learner’s skills, competencies, learning outcomes, and accomplishments as demonstrated via assessments, courses, programs, and degrees, as well as co-curricular experiences such as internships. The CLR is not a replacement for the academic transcript but is a more useful student record for students, employers, and others who need to understand and validate postsecondary learning.

2 How does it work?

CLR content can include portfolios, learning artifacts, course descriptions and syllabi, rubrics, performance evaluations, and other materials that help document what a learner knows and can do. The CLR compiles these component pieces and relevant data by drawing from an institution’s student information system, learning management and assessment systems, co-curricular system, electronic catalog, or other internal databases, using a common identifier linked to an individual student. Some institutions have sufficient internal capacity to [create the infrastructure that a CLR requires](#), while others may elect to work with outside vendors and an external data warehouse. CLRs have been designed to be compiled in digital form and, like a transcript, constitute an official institutional document.

3 Who’s doing it?

With support from the Lumina Foundation, [NASPA](#) and the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO) are collaborating to [support the development and scaling of CLRs](#). Building on that work, the Tennessee Board of Regents is working to [scale a version of a CLR](#). To ensure compatibility of the digital record across institutions and the workforce, members of the IMS Global Learning Consortium are [developing a CLR technical standard](#) for interoperability of the records. Institutions engaged in related work include Elon University’s [Visual Experiential Transcript](#), Capella University’s

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[Competency Map](#), and Loma Linda University's [Experience Transcript](#). The University of California, San Diego provides students with an electronic transcript that includes extra context for courses taken as well as a co-curricular record that highlights a student's involvement outside the classroom.

4 Why is it significant?

By enabling learners to document and share their competencies and achievements more comprehensively than the traditional transcript, the CLR offers students a more nuanced way to distinguish themselves from others as they pursue their goals for employment and further education. As an academic record, the CLR shifts attention away from seat-time metrics to richer measures of an individual's abilities, such as competencies. Another specific benefit is that the CLR can be used to document accomplishments and skills by learners who have not yet earned a college degree or similar credential (e.g., microcredentials); such a benefit could help those without degrees obtain meaningful employment. Especially when they are aligned to published industry skills frameworks, digital credentials like the CLR can help HR offices better assess how well suited an individual is for a particular job, while also helping individuals determine how well suited they are for specific jobs.

5 What are the downsides?

Development of the CLR is reliant on widely adopted data specifications for transmitting and encoding individual records. The IMS Global [Comprehensive Learner Record](#) effort, scheduled for completion in early 2019, is specifically designed to address that concern. Also, a commonly accepted lexicon of terminology is needed for coherent and consistent comparisons across providers, which is the focus of [CTDL](#), the Credential Transparency Description Language. Better interoperability is needed among the disparate data systems that collect records that inform a student's CLR. To address this issue, IMS Global provides [CASE](#), the Competencies and Academic Standards Exchange. Until software suppliers adopt a common language and ways for relevant IT systems to share data effectively, organizations and institutions will be slow to adopt CLR, hindering its development. Resources, including money, time, and expertise, will be required to address these challenges, as well as collaboration forums for cross-initiative, multiorganizational coordination.

6 Where is it going?

Designers continue to support the development and scaling of CLRs, including work to achieve the interoperability that will be critical to helping integrate data now found in an institution's databases, records of a student's co-curricular achievements, and emerging tools that track student experiences. As developers collaborate to build CLR solutions, a set of common standards for their use could evolve that will support their adoption across higher education. Integration with existing institutional reporting processes, such as those for regulatory compliance and accreditation, would likely help drive adoption of the CLR. With adoption, institutions might begin to develop appropriate governance structures and policies to guide their use of CLRs. Cultural change will be needed for institutions to embrace a CLR-informed learning paradigm built around the achievements of individual learners. Such issues are discussed regularly at meetings like the IMS Global [Digital Credentials Summit](#), where CLR advancements and developing norms are shared, and AACRAO's Technology & Transfer Conference.

7 What are the implications for teaching and learning?

CLRs are helping drive an important shift in recordkeeping at colleges and universities, moving from a record of when learners were enrolled and what courses they took to what they learned and accomplished. CLRs help students develop metacognitive structures of demonstrated knowledge and skills, as well as the agency needed to focus on important gaps for their educational and career goals. One day, CLRs may free campus curriculum designs from a narrow focus on credit hours and could thus promote broader interdisciplinary learning. Further, expanded records of accomplishment that can be readily accessed in digital form like the CLR offer greater value than a transcript to learners and their employers. Transparency and standardization of the CLR will give employers a deeper and more common understanding of the skills that learners present when they apply for employment. By helping higher education focus on skills, competencies, and learning outcomes versus seat time and grades, the CLR will enhance integration between what colleges teach, what learners learn and what capacities they master, and what abilities employers can expect when they hire learners with particular experience and credentials.