

The Evolution of the Transcript

Scenario

Marie is a junior majoring in land management. Last year, she was invited to participate in an experimental program of “expanded transcripts,” which include not just the credit hours that would ordinarily appear on a transcript but also evidence of learning from her courses and write-ups on learning experiences outside the classroom. When Marie and her advisor met last year, they used the expanded transcript for discussion. Her advisor noted that Marie had tested out of several French courses and that she had a badge for extreme proficiency. Marie explained that she moved from Haiti to the United States when she was 14 years old. Because English was her second language, she struggled initially. Because of that, she now tutored students who were learning English as a second language at the college’s International Institute—and this was also reflected on her extended transcript.

Her advisor mentioned a service learning opportunity in Mozambique for the upcoming summer in which students from agriculture and IT majors would be working in a fair trade coffee cooperative and asked if Marie would be interested. Marie’s trip to Mozambique changed her educational path. Because she was conversationally bilingual, she was often selected to negotiate for provisions for the group as a whole and for materials for the IT contingent. She was also frequently called upon to explain to local visitors what the team was doing. She returned to school with a keen interest in international community support.

This fall, she was pleased to have her travel abroad and her summer work efforts recorded in her expanded transcript. Dr. Rafe, who headed the project, also nominated Marie for a student leadership prize, which she subsequently received. Marie believes that this recognition (reflected in her expanded transcript) led to her securing an internship with an international nonprofit foundation this summer. She’s hoping the internship might lead to a job offer from the foundation. But even if she isn’t offered a job, the inclusion of the internship on her transcript validates her foundation experience, which could lead to other opportunities.

1 What is it?

Efforts are under way to **capture a broader range of learning experiences and create frameworks to curate them**, providing a more holistic view of student learning. In contrast to traditional transcripts, expanded records—sometimes called comprehensive learner records—would contain a learner’s entire academic history from multiple institutions. These records could include “extended transcripts,” representing the progress at individual credentialing organizations, as well as research, service learning, internships, study abroad, badges, and co-curricular achievements. In this way, a comprehensive learner record would provide greater clarity into competencies and outcomes, better representing what a student knows and can do. Although the specifics of such a record remain a work in progress, those involved agree that it should serve as both a historical document and a formative tool to help guide students through their academic careers. Comprehensive learner records should also conform to standards that allow easy linking to data and the evidence they contain, facilitating transparency about student learning

2 How does it work?

The comprehensive learner record is envisioned as a **digital record of an individual’s educational journey**, providing evidence of learning and showing progress toward a credential. Students can interact with the record in formative ways as they pursue educational pathways. A dashboard might show a mix of learning approaches and identify different sources of learning, including co-curricular activities, credit hours, internships, or academic awards. Students could use the record to match jobs with their competencies. They could curate the record to provide a customized view, and then provide appropriate access rights to the curated view. The structure of the comprehensive learner record might use [standards from IMS Global](#) to ensure data are transferrable, trustworthy, accessible, sharable through a link, and as discoverable as a student wants them to be. Metadata standards of the new record are intended to align with the emerging work of the [Credential Transparency Initiative](#) to promote shared understanding through the use of common terms.

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3 Who's doing it?

Although considerations of a broader student record date back to at least the 1990s, the availability of new technologies, combined with growing pressures on higher education to demonstrate its value, has **moved the discussion into the mainstream**. A 2015 [report](#) from the Carnegie Foundation highlights concerns about the credit hour. Operating on a grant from the Lumina Foundation, Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (NASPA) and the American Association of College Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO) have partnered with several colleges to examine existing models and build prototypes for a new kind of record. Elon University is experimenting with a visual version of its “Experiential Transcript,” which would complement the traditional academic transcript, covering areas such as study abroad, volunteer service, internships, and leadership efforts. Stanford University is working on a model called “scholarship records,” which would allow students to add context to transcripts by selecting faculty-specified learning outcomes offered for more than 1,600 courses. University of Maryland University College is creating an extended transcript to evidence demonstrated competencies and is exploring adding options such as badges and honor society recognition. The University of Wisconsin–Madison has been working with the Wisconsin School of Business to determine the requirements of a holistic view of a student’s educational path and how to reflect the program, major competencies, and experiential learning. IMS is spearheading efforts to establish standards for these new student records.

4 Why is it significant?

A **reimagined student record can present a much broader view of students’ activities, accomplishments, and learning**, as well as how the different learning experiences intersect and build off of each other. A comprehensive learner record could be organized by outcomes and competencies rather than by course and credit hour, allowing co-curricular experiences to be situated alongside academic coursework. As a result, what the student *knows* and *can do* would be emphasized over *how* a student gained that knowledge. This kind of student record can serve as a mechanism to validate efforts such as competency-based education and direct assessment. Because it would track experiences such as MOOCs, off-campus seminars, global education, or community service, it could offer deeper insight into the character and interests of the student.

5 What are the downsides?

The greatest concern with developing a comprehensive learner record might be that it would disturb a longstanding model that, despite its shortcomings, is an established component of higher education. Until such a system is in place, questions arise about how it would be used. **Shifting control of learner records from an institution to students would represent a sea change**, raising concerns including the degree to which students might be able to skew the presentation of the contents in their favor. A comprehensive learner record is more complicated than existing systems, and faculty, students, administrators, and employers may be cautious in accepting the different standards of a new system. Students might worry about how much of their information would be discoverable or available for public review.

6 Where is it going?

The comprehensive learner record currently exists as various prototypes. **Numerous details must be addressed about hosting, agency, and format**. Security is a particular concern, with some efforts currently focused on digital signatures to ensure that a document has not been altered. Students who access their records should not be able to change essential data, but they may be able to reorganize it or add comments. Plans for handling multi-institutional transcripts are under discussion, as are details of credential management functions that could pull a learner’s record from an institution’s proprietary format and convert to a legacy standard portable format during a transition period. New prototypes may connect the student record with data such as student e-portfolios, course catalog, or degree plans.

7 What are the implications for teaching and learning?

A thorough and accessible student record could empower learners to establish more meaningful and impactful goals in their education or careers. Students selecting courses or other learning experiences for a new term might review their records to see whether their current choices complement their intended academic trajectory. This shift away from the traditional transcript **parallels a move on the part of accreditors to emphasize learning outcomes**. In specifying course outcomes for student records, faculty may discover that their courses become more outcome oriented. Advisors may find their roles expanding as student documents reflect a broader view of the learner’s accomplishments and interests. Students can showcase their degrees and experiences via social media in a manner that is verified by the institution.