

LUMINA FOUNDATION

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A woman with long dark hair, wearing a blue cardigan over a black top, is sitting at a black metal table outdoors. She is smiling and looking towards the camera. On the table in front of her are several papers, a pen, and a pair of glasses. The background shows a large, multi-story brick building with many windows, and a clear blue sky. The scene is brightly lit, suggesting it's daytime.

Tomorrow's transcript

Effort to reform
student records puts
learning at the core



Houston, we're solving a problem: Page 4



A bigger picture in Boston: Page 16

On the cover: Lisa Carpenter, 42, a student at the University of Houston-Downtown (UHD), attends classes in the shadow of the Harris County Jail, where she once was held on a drug conviction. She's since turned her life around, and a new-look student transcript being developed by UHD will help illustrate that transformation.

Editor's note: The stories in this issue of *Focus* were reported and written by Steve Giegerich. Giegerich, a former education writer for the Associated Press and a onetime journalism instructor at Columbia University, is a staff writer for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*.

Michael Feldman has captivated public radio listeners for years by mining the comedic potential of one simple question — the question posed in the title of his popular quiz show, *Whad'Ya Know?*

It's a great question, and not just because it presents endless possibilities for humor. These days, as employers look to close the skills gap and the nation seeks to develop the talent it needs to thrive in the 21st century, the "whad'ya know?" question is a serious and critical one — for all of us.

What *do* you know, really? What does anyone know? And what proof of that knowledge can you offer?

One might think that a college or university transcript, the official record of a student's academic achievement, would provide ample proof. Not so. In fact, the college transcript — though long useful as a record of a student's course history, individual grades, GPA and credentials earned — has really never said much about what that student *knows*. Yes, it lists what he or she has done, but it reveals virtually nothing about what's actually been learned — what knowledge and skills have been obtained — through all of that doing.

These days there's a movement afoot to change that, to transform the static student transcript into a more dynamic, inclusive and useful record of student achievement.

This issue of *Lumina Foundation Focus* magazine explores that nascent effort, and it does so right from the front lines of change. Longtime higher education reporter Steve Giegerich talks with registrars, faculty members, administrators and students at institutions that are tackling the transcript-reform challenge head-on, including the University of Houston-Downtown (UHD) and Quinsigamond Community College near Boston.

As the stories on these pages make clear, the reform efforts on these and many other campuses are just beginning — and no one expects to quickly revamp a document that's endured, essentially unchanged, for many decades. Still, the drive to transform the student record is underway, and there's a growing body of evidence that it's gaining momentum. For example:

- At most of today's colleges and universities, a student's extracurricular and co-curricular activities (clubs, volunteer work, service projects and the like) are included in some way as part of his or her official record.
- Scores of colleges are now accepting high school transcripts that show how students demonstrate specific learning outcomes or competencies, rather than simply recording the time they spent in classrooms or the grades they received.
- In seeking to create a more expansive student transcript, many U.S. institutions are taking cues from the United Kingdom, where 32 institutions have already issued such transcripts — called Higher Education Achievement Reports (www.hear.ac.uk) — to more than 400,000 students. These trends, and the burgeoning reform effort they reflect, point to a long-term goal that is both ambitious and tremendously exciting: a student record that is digital (and thus easily shared with employers and other institutions); comprehensive (in that it credits all types of learning, not just the in-classroom type); and portable (i.e., "owned," and for the most part maintained, by the student rather than the institution).

Eventually, the new-look transcripts that emerge from this work will offer huge benefits. Employers will be better able to find job applicants who have the specific knowledge and skill sets they need. Institutions will have better ways to define, demonstrate and increase the value they add to their students' educational experiences. And students will have a comprehensive, flexible, permanent and portable record of their learning — no matter where or how that learning was attained.

This issue of *Focus* offers just a glimpse of those benefits, as seen in the lives of several students. You'll read about:

- Lisa Carpenter, a UHD student who, at age 42, is relying on her expanded transcript to help illustrate her transformative personal journey from a Houston jail cell to the boardroom of a local nonprofit.
- John Locke, whose student record documents another inspiring turnaround — from aimless, troubled young man living on Houston's streets to a dedicated community activist and president of UHD's Student Government Association.
- Cherise Connolly, a dual-enrollment high school senior who, while pursuing an associate degree at Quinsigamond, is bolstering her college transcript with community service projects.

In addition to these real-life stories, there's also a wealth of information on our website, www.luminafoundation.org. There, *Focus* offers several extra features, including audio clips; prototypes of new-look transcripts from the campuses that are developing them, and a photo essay that delves deeper into John Locke's inspiring story.

We hope all of this material adds to what *you* know about the college transcript — especially, what tomorrow's transcript can and should be.

Jamie P. Merisotis
President and CEO
Lumina Foundation



Student records: Off the shelf and into the real world

Tom Green still recalls his trips into the musty archive holding the transcripts of Seton Hall University students. These records — bearing the handwriting of Seton Hall professors dating back to the 19th century — dutifully listed the course work completed by the first students to enroll at the university, the amount of time they spent in those classes and, of course, the grades awarded at semester's end.

In time, the inked transcript gave way to a typewritten document, which was eventually supplanted by mainframe data entry and all of the technology that has followed. Through it all, though, the essential content of the transcript hasn't changed. It is and always will be the document that follows anyone who has spent time in college — if only to earn a single credit.

"It's valuable inside higher education as a document that conveys a certain amount of information about what a student has accomplished," says Green, a former Seton Hall official who is now the associate executive director of the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO).

But Green and other experts are aware that, in the world beyond the campus green, the transcript is less valuable. In fact, in some quarters, it's viewed as an esoteric document that says little to nothing about what a student actually learned in those lecture halls, labs and classrooms.

Essentially, today's transcript is what it has been for many decades: a copy of a student's permanent record at a particular institution — the courses taken, grades received and credentials earned.

But things are changing. Today, 15 years into the 21st century, the college transcript is being transformed. Many experts say the changes are long overdue

— that the traditional transcript is too limited and imprecise to properly serve today's students and employers, or even the institutions that issue them.

"It has always been a relatively poor document to communicate how well someone knows (learned) material," says Matthew Pittinsky, an assistant research professor at Arizona State University and the chief executive officer of Parchment, an independent firm on the cutting edge of transcript reform. "And the other option, the diploma, conveys even less."

Kevin Carey, director of education policy at New America, is even more direct. In a recent op-ed piece in the *New York Times*, Carey quipped that "the standard diploma has roughly the same amount of information that prisoners of war are required to divulge under the Geneva Convention."

Policymakers, registrars and higher education administrators say the problem is not what the transcript tells employers and graduate school admissions officers about an applicant. It's what the document *doesn't* say.

"Currently, credits and units are the currency of learning," notes Joellen Shendy, associate vice provost and registrar at the University of Maryland University College (UMUC). "But time and place are not proxies for learning — and they were never meant to be. We've all sat in a class in college or high school where we've learned something different than the guy next to us, even though we sat in those seats the same amount of time."

The reconfigured student record rejects the notion that grades or credit hours are the only — or even the best — way to gauge student learning. Instead, it embraces the idea that a student is the sum total of his or her learning.

Make no mistake: grades still matter.

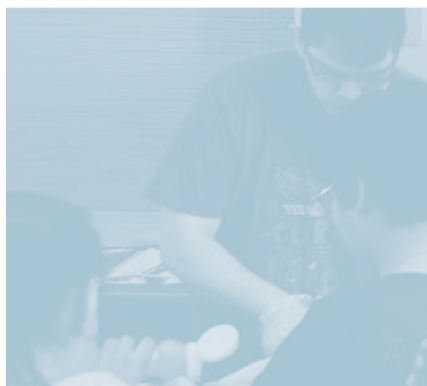
"We're not going to throw out the transcript; we're looking to enrich the information," says Green, who is overseeing AACRAO's participation in a Lumina Foundation program to evaluate and upgrade the transcripts issued by 12 U.S. colleges and universities (see accompanying story).

But in the eyes of many, a viable and meaningful student record must also credit the learning gained from service learning projects, military service, community volunteer efforts, job experience and other activities. What's more, it must put that learning in context, taking into account the varying circumstances that define the disparate lives of today's more than 20 million postsecondary students.

"Students today are doing a lot of things that are not contained in the boundaries of a course," says Robert Sheets, a research professor at the George Washington University Institute of Public Policy. So the college transcript must break boundaries, too. It must, as Shendy says, assess students "a little more holistically."

The concept of a more comprehensive transcript is nothing new, at least from a global perspective. The non-scholastic activities of university graduates in Great Britain have been cited on "diploma supplements" for more than a decade. Here in the U.S., Stanford University, the University of California-San Diego and Elon University in North Carolina are among a handful of institutions that have pioneered advancements in student records and credentialing. And there are more such institutions exploring this area each year.

Three primary factors are now pushing this innovative trend into the postsecondary mainstream: 1.) the embrace of competency-based learning, 2.) the disruption in the



job market that began with the Great Recession, and 3.) digital technology.

Kevin Kruger, president of NASPA, a national organization representing student affairs professionals in higher education, marvels at the “cottage industry” spawned by this growing effort to upgrade the traditional transcript.

“It’s the Wild West out there,” Kruger says of the proliferation of software developers, institutions and various parties that compile and deliver these new-look records of student achievement.

Arizona-based Parchment, headed by Pittinsky, is one of several start-ups to which colleges and universities now outsource the task. The biggest competition to firms like Parchment comes from the colleges and universities themselves. Typically, administrative leaders form teams of registrar’s office and information technology personnel who revamp the student record and implement the technical changes necessary to build it.

NASPA’s Kruger predicts that institutions and the private sector will eventually adopt something akin to a universal template. “It won’t be 140 approaches, but a core way to do this,” he says.

Green, however, cautions that “it could be a number of years before we have a consensus on what is best” for those colleges and universities that are making the transition to a modern transcript.

Most experts think that the student record of the future will in many ways resemble a LinkedIn profile. They envision some sort of Web-based portfolio or compendium that reflects a wide range of a student’s accomplishments — and does so in a way that is fully digital (to ensure it can be shared online with employers) and portable (so students

“own” their records and update them throughout their careers and lives).

The possibilities for this digital, personal portfolio are endless — and to some, a bit frightening, as anyone who has seen a LinkedIn profile listing middle school science projects can attest.

The self-curated, overly inclusive nature of such profiles presents a big challenge to those involved in transcript reform. College and university officials are working hard to decide how much information is, in today’s social media shorthand, TMI. Even more important, they’re focusing intently on quality assurance, looking for ways to validate the learning inherent in a student’s record. That step — though described by Kruger as “one of the headaches of the process” — is critical for any institution that plans to put its name, and thus stake its reputation, on any such record.

Despite the headaches, policymakers and administrators involved in this effort are convinced that the transformed transcript will benefit all students. Among the first to benefit, they say, will be older learners, first-generation students, and the 19 million Americans who, according to Parchment, hold “educational certifications apart from an academic degree.”

In fact, UMUC’s Shendy sees these revamped student records as a promising new rung on the ladder of success for tens of millions of Americans. “The students’ capacity to interact with their records in different ways will open up a ton of connections they otherwise wouldn’t have made,” says Shendy. “This lets students understand what they can do and what they have learned to communicate — and that’s a huge thing, because the students’ most precious commodity is themselves.”

12 institutions tackling student record reform

As colleges and universities all over the nation consider how they might create a more comprehensive student record, a group of 12 institutions is embracing the idea in earnest, aided by a \$1.5 million project supported by Lumina Foundation.

The schools, with help from NASPA and AACRAO (the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers), will seek to collect, document and share student outcomes and competencies that reflect learning that is gained, not just from academic courses, but also from a broad range of student experiences, including co-curricular activities.

The participating institutions are:

- Brandman University (Irvine, Calif.)
- Elon University (Elon, N.C.)
- IUPUI (Indianapolis, Ind.)
- Quinsigamond Community College (Worcester, Mass.)
- Stanford University (Palo, Alto, Calif.)
- University of Central Oklahoma (Edmond, Okla.)
- University of Houston-Downtown (Houston, Texas)
- University of Maryland University College (Upper Marlboro, Md.)
- University of South Carolina (Columbia, S.C.)
- University of Wisconsin Colleges and University of Wisconsin-Extension (Madison, Wis.)

Note: Two additional institutions will be named by year’s end to round out the group of 12.



Effort to enhance student records sets the stage for second chances

Houston, Texas — The quarter-mile separating the commuter parking lot from the main campus of the University of Houston-Downtown (UHD) is not an insurmountable distance. Still, given Houston's famously oppressive humidity, most students choose an air-conditioned shuttle bus — or a trip on the city's light-rail system — over a stroll to class.

However they get to campus, few of UHD's 14,000-plus students will ever travel farther to earn a college degree than Lisa Carpenter. For four painful months in the late 1990s, Carpenter had an unobstructed view of the UHD campus from the upper floor of a building just a few hundred yards from that commuter lot.

"I would look out the window every day, watching the students going to classes," Carpenter recalls. "It was so depressing, knowing where they were going and where I was going."

Her destination was a state prison. Held temporarily in the downtown Harris County Jail, Carpenter was scheduled for transfer to serve a two-year sentence for felony prescription fraud.

As part of her volunteer work with a local nonprofit, Lisa Carpenter (center) leads a group women — all of whom delivered babies while incarcerated — in training for a 5K road race in Houston.





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Now a UHD accounting major, Carpenter regularly passes the lockup on her way to classes in the former Merchants and Manufacturers (M&M) Building, a massive Art Deco edifice with 14 miles of floor space and 40,000 windows panes, many of them overlooking the skyline of the nation's fourth-largest city. Carpenter, 42, doesn't hide from her past, choosing instead to embrace it as a reminder of where she's been and how far she's come. From a fifth-floor library conference room window, Carpenter raises a blind to point out the jail to a visitor. She lingers a moment, absorbing the reverse view of the building she occupied briefly more than 15 years ago.

"Humbling," she mutters. "Very humbling."

UHD, a four-year institution where the average student is a shade over 27 years old, houses more than its share of compelling back stories. Few are as dramatic as Carpenter's, but each experience in its own way defines this urban university, where 70 percent of students are the first in their families to enter higher education.

To UHD officials, the predominance of first-generation and nontraditional learners serves as a constant reminder that academics, though paramount, aren't the be-all and end-all for students here. Classroom experiences are just one part of the broader mosaic of personal biography, community involvement and service learning that shapes UHD students.

"We really believe in not just educating or helping prepare people for vocations or careers, because any university can do that," says UHD President William V. Flores. "We believe in really educating future citizens and helping them to be engaged and educated citizens who are committed to making a better society and country. That is embedded in our philosophy and should be at the heart of what all public institutions stand for."

The commitment to turn out well-rounded graduates, otherwise evident in every corner of this largely vertical campus, has yet to materialize on the student transcripts that UHD submits to prospective employers and graduate school admissions officers. But that will change once the university completes a full-throttle effort to transform the transcript it has used for 41 years into a document designed to portray a full range of student accomplishments, on and off campus.

Workforce implications

"A lot of employers complain that students aren't necessarily ready for the job market coming straight out of college," says senior psychology major John Locke, president of the UHD Student Government Association. "It's really important to highlight what students are doing in extracurricular activities to help employers translate that directly to the workforce."



UHD President William V. Flores says the student record reform effort fits in perfectly with the university's commitment to produce "engaged and educated citizens who are committed to making a better society." (Photo provided by UHD)

John Locke (center), a UHD senior and president of the Student Government Association, spends his lunch hour working at a voter-registration event. It's one of countless volunteer and community service projects reflected in Locke's growing student portfolio.



Locke sees the enhanced transcript as an opportunity for students to highlight “the high-impact learning experiences, learning opportunities where you are actually in the trenches, boots on the ground.”

Third-year Spanish major and honors student Edith Aldaba calls the student record reform effort an opportunity to show corporate recruiters and graduate school admissions offices that a UHD education is much more than “school, school, school and grades, grades, grades.” She insists that “including the organizations and community service is more important than just the grades, because it puts you ahead of other students who have just focused on school. You’ve actually made a difference.”

UHD officials hope to complete the reform project by the time the current class of freshmen earn their degrees four years from now. Until then, the transcript will basically replicate the document that certified the academic status of 1997 graduate Laquitta DeMerchant.

Until recently, DeMerchant hadn’t given much thought to the record of her undergraduate course work in UHD’s computer information systems degree program. Now though, from a distance of 18 years, DeMerchant sees that her transcript skips over her tenure as treasurer of the UHD chapter of the Association of Information Technology Professionals and ignores the interpersonal skills she perfected as a member of the prestigious Partners in Leadership group.

Clearly, DeMerchant has overcome whatever obstacles the transcript of yesteryear might have placed in her career path. As founder, president and chief executive

officer of Fuzion Apps, DeMerchant and her computer systems firm have won national acclaim (including a visit to the White House and personal recognition from the president) for developing “Aequitas,” a mobile application that gives job applicants instant background information about potential employers.

As a business owner, DeMerchant now has a deeper understanding of what is missing from her undergraduate record. “The transcript today is archaic,” she says. “It doesn’t meet the times.” And she remembers a long-ago classmate who exemplified the deficiencies. The student was a terrible test-taker, DeMerchant recalls, “but everyone knew he was the smartest kid in the computer information program.” The intangibles — such as his ability to quickly decipher complicated equations and share the solutions with classmates — weren’t reflected on his official record. And so, to prospective employers, the student was, at best, a “C” student.

In her current role, DeMerchant is often called on to review job applications, so she understands now more than ever what the transcript *didn’t* say about her classmate. “I’m aware of the gap,” she says.

Filling that gap — helping the student record convey what has largely been missing — has been the driving force behind the transcript work, not just at UHD, but at institutions across the nation. Specifically, these institutions are looking for ways to enhance the student record so that it reflects not just what students have *done* — the courses taken, activities pursued, honors earned, etc. — but what they have *learned* from what they’ve done. Ultimately,



Laquitta DeMerchant, a 1997 graduate of UHD, is now president and CEO of Fuzion Apps, a computer systems firm whose work has garnered national acclaim, including a visit to the White House.



Recent UHD graduate Iris Silva (left), Associate Professor of Biology Poonam Gulati (center) and Claudia Chavez-Pinto work with fourth-graders during a science enrichment event at Crockett Elementary School. Chavez-Pinto, a graduate of UHD, is the principal at Crockett, a specialized pre-K-5 school on Houston's near north side.

tomorrow's transcript, the fully revamped student record, will go beyond a mere list to provide concrete, reliable evidence of a student's knowledge, skills and abilities.

Admittedly, the reform effort is a long way from that ultimate goal, but the journey has clearly begun. And much of the fuel for that journey comes from the demands of a job market that continues to evolve more than five years after the Great Recession.

"Employers are looking for things (students) have done. They want someone who can walk in and learn the job quickly," says Robert Sheets, a professor and workforce analyst with the George Washington University Institute of Public Policy.

The revitalization of the transcript also responds to the needs of what used to be called nontraditional students, those who are not on a four-year residential campus and therefore constitute the growing majority of postsecondary students. Millions of such students are enrolled at community colleges and at four-year institutions such as UHD and the University of Maryland University College (UMUC), an online institution that caters to professionals and military personnel, many stationed overseas.

"Because we're primarily online, our students don't always partake in what might be considered traditional campus activities," says UMUC Associate Vice Provost and Registrar Joellen Shendy. "But they may partake of activities in a different environment. For instance, we have full-time students who are PTA leaders. You won't

find an 18-year-old leading a PTA. The kinds of things our students are involved in tend to look a little different."

The student record revisions envisioned by UHD will showcase the school's commitment to educating its student beyond the boundaries of classrooms, labs and lecture halls.

"These students are street-smart; they realize they have to give something back to the community, and we're giving them that chance," says Associate Vice President of Academic Affairs Faiza Khoja.

She and other school officials say first-generation students — seven out of ten UHD learners — stand to benefit most from student record reform. Many such students find it difficult to navigate the unfamiliar territory of the college experience.

"I had the support of my parents, but they weren't able to guide me through it," recalls Claudia Chavez-Pinto. "It was all on me. There was emotional support, but that was about all."

Chavez-Pinto earned her degree and is now the principal of a Houston elementary school. But most first-generation UHD students don't fare as well. In fact, of those who enrolled as freshmen in 2008, only 19.2 percent had earned a diploma by 2014 (nationally, 59 percent of college freshmen graduate within six years). Moreover, first-generation students who do reach the finish line often stumble into a competitive employment marketplace that puts a premium not on what you know, but on *who* you know.

"Nontraditional students haven't necessarily had the privileges of soccer coaches and that type of guidance growing up," notes Poonam Gulati, an associate professor of biology and microbiology and interim director for the Center for Community Engagement. Having a more comprehensive student record "helps them advance their own careers, whatever they may be."

To Vida Robertson, the extended transcript helps mitigate the often-invisible advantage of societal privilege.

"It shifts us in a new direction," says Robertson, an associate professor of English and director of the Center for Critical Race Studies. "In previous generations, who you knew spoke directly to the kind of experience you could bring to bear and the quality of work (you could do)," he says. "It was an undocumented space where we allowed a certain social cachet.

"The comprehensive approach to documenting student work allows us to offset that 'good ol' boy' network by saying that 'Yes, (a student took) certain classes, and we've qualitatively and quantitatively come to these (grades).' But there's a broader construct that also speaks to their knowledge, their experience and their value."

Puncturing privilege

Robertson compares the new transcript's function to that of "someone's dad or their (father's) friend at the golf course, giving them a connection. This is a new-age way of doing it, especially for those who are less connected."

For Associate Vice President Khoja, the importance of adding a real-world component to the academic transcript became clear when she served as a liaison between UHD seniors and area employers. The employers didn't dismiss grade-point averages, she noticed, but they were just as interested in another assessment tool. "They kept asking about the capstone projects," Khoja recalls, referring to comprehensive, end-of-program projects designed to showcase students' mastery of the subject matter.

The importance of considering the "whole student" prompted UHD to focus on community engagement as a core part of the transcript-revision effort. UHD loosely defines community engagement as outside volunteer activity that doesn't exceed 10 hours per semester. Campus officials view community engagement as a gateway to increased enrollment in so-called "circular service learning" courses — classes that allow students to earn academic credits through community-based projects.

Flores, the college president, says an analysis of data that showed second- and third-year students struggling to connect academics to "the outside world" helped make service learning a top priority.

A practical example can be found at Crockett Elementary, a specialized pre-K-5 school on Houston's near north side — not coincidentally, the school that is led by Principal Chavez-Pinto. As a UHD undergraduate, she did her student teaching at Crockett. These days her





Faiza Khoja (left), UHD's associate vice president for academic affairs, confers with Vida Robertson, an associate professor of English and director of the university's Center for Critical Race Studies.

pupils, some as young as 5, are mastering microscopes, planting gardens, analyzing the contents of bottled water and, by smearing a small amount of yeast on the hand of one student, learning how an epidemic can spread through the simple act of shaking hands.

The instructors teaching these rudimentary science lessons aren't employees of the Houston Independent School District; they're UHD biology students. One of those students, senior Milimar Murillo, says her experience of guiding Crockett third-graders through the water-testing experiment reinforced the adage that "you don't really know something until you teach it to someone else."

Gulati, the associate professor of biology and microbiology, calls the Crockett-UHD partnership a logical extension of a science program that promotes undergraduate research. "It's really exciting because, at their age, which is mostly sophomores, they realize they can contribute something to the community," says Gulati. "Sometimes they think they have to get their Ph.Ds before they can start doing any of this stuff. A lot of

them tell me that when they go to their med school or grad school interview, this pops up to the committee."

For Chavez-Pinto, the UHD-Crockett partnership is like a mirror that allows her to see two versions of her younger self: one in the faces of the 500 children she welcomes to school each morning, and another in the UHD students who come to assist.

"They are almost like Big Brothers/Big Sisters," she says of the relationship between her pupils and the UHD teaching teams. "It's not only tutoring. (The young ones) look at the college kids and have aspirations to be like them. It's a connection that shows them that (college) can happen for them, too."

UHD student Irma Zia, who had no serious brush with science until the seventh grade, knows exactly what Chavez-Pinto means. "There were science studies," Zia recalls of her Houston elementary school experience. "But it wasn't stressed as much as history or English. I didn't see a microscope until intermediate school."

And when that finally happened, she was hooked. She's now a fourth-year microbiology major, preparing



Irma Zia, a fourth-year microbiology student at UHD who plans to go on to medical school, helps students at Crockett Elementary enjoy the science-immersion experiences that she wishes she'd had as a youngster.



UHD student Edith Aldaba (right) loves the idea of having a student record system that keeps track of co-curricular activities. “Whenever you go for a job interview ... they ask you what kind of community service you’ve done,” she says.

for the Medical College Admission Test, and planning to apply to medical schools in the spring.

During the interview process, Zia plans to highlight a vital component of her education that won't be listed on the UHD transcript: The lessons she's helped teach at Crockett Elementary the past two years.

Filling a gap in her own early education, Zia has engaged the Crockett pupils in a variety of science-based activities, none more engaging than an “eeww”-inducing examination of their own skin. “We swabbed their necks, their arms and their feet to show them that bacteria are everywhere,” Zia says. “They didn't believe it because they couldn't see anything. Then we put the swabs under the microscope. They were a little surprised ... and a little disgusted.”

Once the logistics are hammered out, UHD officials are confident that tweaking an existing student database may be all that is necessary to turn the conceptual transcript into a reality.

Vida Robertson predicts a smooth transition. “It's already part of our lives,” he says, referring to the interactive student record program known as “GatorSync” (a nod to the school mascot). Once operational, the system will allow students to add content regularly. And if the reaction of junior Edith Aldaba is any indication, the feature should be well received.

“Whenever you go for a job interview or a college (interview), they ask you what kind of community service you've done,” says Aldaba, a Spanish major and an officer in the UHD Environmental Club. “It's easy to

lose track of that. Having a system where you can document it is going to be helpful."

Were the timing different, John Locke would benefit greatly from the upgraded transcript. Unfortunately, Locke's official record now fails to include his two terms as president of the UHD Student Government Association, the findings of a comprehensive study he prepared on homelessness in Houston (a subject he unfortunately knew far too well), and his leadership of a student group that serves meals to the poor on the steps of the downtown library. It overlooks the fact that he has realized his childhood dream "of one day working in one of those tall skyscrapers" by landing an internship with an international brokerage firm.

And it says nothing about his inspiring back story.

Locke dropped out of high school at age 15, choosing what he now admits was an "uncharted path" of alcohol and drug abuse. Employment through his mid-20s was sporadic. When money ran low, as it often did, Locke took refuge in homeless shelters — including some he would later revisit for his UHD research project. He also spent time in Houston-area lockups — including the Harris County Jail, where run-ins with the law landed him on more than one occasion.

"I was a screw-up," Locke admits. "I'm embarrassed by it now."

The problem was never lack of intelligence. "I didn't have the motivation," Locke says. "I was caught in a different ideal of myself." The turnaround came when Locke, tired of "surrendering to negativity," pursued and earned his GED. Soon after that, at age 27, he enrolled at UHD as a psychology major.

"Coming to the university helped me find my identity," he says. "Better late than never, right?"

Locke's story is sure to capture the heart of even the most hardened hiring manager, but HR directors will have to wait a few years to hear it. Though due to graduate in Spring 2016, he plans to stay at UHD and pursue a master's degree in nonprofit management.

If he follows through, Locke could well encounter another former resident of the nearby Harris County Jail. Lisa Carpenter also is giving serious thought to seeking a master's in nonprofit management — an achievement that would cap an already remarkable transition.

Carpenter, jailed for phoning in an illicit drug prescription, paid for her mistake long after her two-year sentence ended. Having given birth to her first child while incarcerated, she struggled through young motherhood. As a paroled felon, Carpenter found that the stigma blocked her from gainful employment and followed her as she moved from one higher-ed institution to another. Saying, "I never got into the college groove," she married and had a second child.

After a string of unfulfilling jobs, she volunteered her services at Santa Maria Hostel, a Houston nonprofit that provides assistance and counseling to women struggling with difficulties similar to her own.

That was a turning point. Her involvement with the hostel's clients — who battle homelessness, substance

abuse and mental health issues — increased to the point that the nonprofit gave her a seat on the board of directors. Always good with numbers, Carpenter now serves as the board treasurer, and she's found her work at Santa Maria to be something of a talisman.

After years of making do in menial jobs, she landed a full-time accounting position soon after being named to the nonprofit's board. About the same time, perhaps not coincidentally, she developed a passion for running. Her zeal for fitness soon found its way to Santa Maria, beginning with Carpenter's decision to teach a nutrition class. Before long, she was helping Santa Maria clients prepare for a 5K road race, leading training regimens along Houston's byways.

Running from trouble

"These are women who have never thought about exercise," Carpenter says. "It's always been drinking and drugging. Now I'm asking them to run three miles."

Meanwhile, Carpenter regained her educational footing by enrolling in her fourth institution of higher learning — UHD — as an accounting major. Returning to school wasn't easy. As a convicted felon, she is ineligible for most federal and state grants and has therefore been forced to self-finance the bulk of her education (UHD tuition and fees average about \$8,000 per semester). Also, like most nontraditional students, she's had to juggle the simultaneous demands of family, work, school and, in her case, Santa Maria.

Her accomplishments outside the classroom, Carpenter says, demonstrate why an expanded transcript is an absolute necessity for nontraditional learners like her.

"I'm 42, so I'm getting a late start on my career, and I'm competing with kids straight out of college," she says. "A lot of them are willing to work for a little less money, and many of them may have had straight A's. My transcript in the past wasn't that great, although recently it's gotten a lot better. But what's going to distinguish me from the 23-year-old with straight A's? Why would they pick me over them? Having a list of grades on a piece of paper just isn't enough. But if an employer is able to dig in a little and see more than the grade on a piece of paper, it may make the difference between getting my foot in the door or not."

In other words, the expanded transcript levels the playing field and instills hope — outcomes one might well expect on a campus distinguished by its commitment to diversity and public service.

"We're a university that gives a second chance," says Khoja, the associate vice president. "We're a university that is a stepping stone. We're here for students who want to make a difference.

"We always talk about America being the land of opportunity. But we see more and more disparity; the middle class is diminishing. But by connecting the dots we're bringing opportunity to minorities and the underrepresented. We're telling them: 'Hey, you have a chance. Let's see how far we can take you.'" ■

UHD senior Milimar Murillo, here doing a hands-on soil exploration with kindergartners at Crockett Elementary, calls her volunteer activities vital learning experiences. "You don't really know something until you teach it to someone else," she says.






Well aware of the challenges, transcript team wades in boldly

Worcester, Mass. — Quinsigamond Community College (QCC) student Kwame Ofori will present an impressive list of achievements on the transcript that will be sent to the Worcester State University admissions office along with his transfer application to begin classes there next fall.

His grades, good enough to earn Ofori a place on the QCC dean's list, will be self-explanatory. And Ofori isn't terribly worried that the transcript won't point out that he earned those exemplary grades while holding down two part-time information technology jobs. But he is concerned that it will skip over his role as executive vice president of the QCC chapter of Phi Theta Kappa (PTK), the international honor society.

"A lot of people think we're just into tech stuff," he says. "This shows I can interact with other people."

Absent a face-to-face interview, the Worcester State admissions team won't find out that Kwami Ofori is, contrary to the stereotype of computer science majors, an extremely sociable young man. All they will glean from his official transcript are the courses he took during his four years at QCC, the number of hours he sat in QCC classrooms, the grades he received and his cumulative GPA.



Computer science major Kwame Ofori (left) — here with classmate Lordia Larbi-Asare at Quinsigamond Community College in Worcester, Mass. — wants his student record to show prospective employers that he's not "just into tech stuff."

Put another way, Worcester State will receive essentially the same document that has followed every Quinsigamond graduate since 1963, when the Boston-area community college opened its doors on the former site of Assumption College.

It's because of students like Ofori that a QCC study team is now working to broaden its narrow record of students' academic achievement. What they seek is a more comprehensive picture of the activities that shape students — in and out of class — and, most important, the learning that stems from those activities.

"I think it's really important to show all the other activities you do because that is part of your college learning experience, says QCC student Cherise Connolly. "College isn't just about grades and the classes you take. It's about the whole, overall experience from all the other things you do, like community service — clubs that might not be academic, but might be just as important." Connolly is wise beyond her years on this topic. She's a dual-enrollment student, on schedule to earn an associate degree in business from QCC in May 2016, about a week before her graduation from nearby Shrewsbury High School.

The genesis of what Quinsigamond has dubbed the "co-curricular transcript" can be traced to a 2013 honors ceremony. At that event, which recognized QCC students' participation in community service projects, Assistant Dean of Students Kevin Butler realized that Quinsigamond was doing little to formally acknowledge students' volunteer work, employment-based learning and other non-classroom activities.

If QCC wasn't keeping track of the extra stuff, Butler surmised, then it stood to reason that the four-year schools considering QCC transfers — not to mention



Gail Carberry, Quinsigamond's president, is fully committed to the idea of revamping the student record. She calls the traditional system too much of a "numbers game," one that results in a transcript that "tells little about you as a human being."

area employers — had no clue what Quinsigamond students were accomplishing beyond the classroom.

"I thought to myself, 'Are we tracking that information?'" Butler recalled. "How does one club know if a student is also involved in PTK and the theater club and the Student Senate? A lot of this info isn't going on the official transcript. When a student transfers or (applies for) a job, we ought to be able to create something to

DQP focuses on learning outcomes

The drive to transform the student transcript ties directly to another major trend in higher education: the effort to define educational quality not by proxy (via grades or credit hours), but by assessing the actual learning that students obtain.

One instrument that is aiding in that effort is Lumina Foundation's Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP). The DQP provides a baseline set of reference points for what students should know and be able to do once they earn associate, bachelor's and master's degrees. It specifies five broad categories for learning, as follows:

- Specialized knowledge
- Broad and integrative knowledge
- Intellectual skills
- Applied and collaborative learning
- Civic and global learning

Within each category, it then arrays a series of specific learning outcomes at each degree level.

In short, the DQP represents a comprehensive and ongoing effort to clearly and concretely define what postsecondary degrees should mean in terms of actual student learning.

For more about the DQP, visit: www.degreeprofile.org.





Kevin Butler, OCC's assistant dean of students, has been involved with the student record reform effort since 2013, when a ceremony to honor students' volunteer efforts got him wondering: "Are we tracking that information?"

give the student in paper form as a supplement to their resumé or transcript. And from there we started to have meetings to figure out what a co-curricular transcript should look like."

At the time, Butler was unaware that decision makers on other campuses were looking for ways to overhaul the traditional student record. "I had no idea," he says. But QCC President Gail Carberry did. Never one to shy from innovation, she relished the chance to modernize the postsecondary transcript.

Room for improvement

"The truth is that kids graduate from high school with better transcripts than the transcripts they get when they graduate from college," she says. "High school students have transcripts that show that they were on the football team or participated in certain clubs. And the reason they've done that for generations is because of the competitive process. The more you could show about your academic capability, as well as your well-roundedness, the better chance you had of getting into your college of choice.

"Once they get into college we stop that practice. It becomes a numbers game. What it says is that you received 4.0 in one class and 3.5 in another. (It says) you did well in math, but didn't do well in English. The transcript tells little about you as a human being. ... And with all the opportunities we have to collect data and make it accessible to people (who make decisions), we should be able to use that technology in a meaningful way."

Carberry encouraged a free exchange of ideas on the merits of expanding the transcript. Most QCC administrators have endorsed the idea of an enhanced student record.

Registrar Tara Fitzgerald-Jenkins, an administrator for 30 years, is among the dissenters. "Let's not muck it up," she says of the traditional transcript. "There's value in it the way it is. I'm not sure we need all that extra stuff."

The opinion of Fitzgerald-Jenkins notwithstanding, the revamping of the QCC co-curricular transcript is inching ahead. And to facilitate the process, Carberry turned to a pair of trusted advisers: Vice President for Strategic Enrollment Development and Student Engagement Lillian Ortiz, an administrator focused on the student side of the equation, and Dale Allen, vice president of community engagement.

Allen, a trained economist, is focused on connecting Quinsigamond students to the workforce and the world beyond. He draws on a parable to explain the process of overhauling the transcript. "It's like approaching an elephant wearing a blindfold," he says. "One person grabs the trunk and says, 'It feels like a snake.' Another hits the side of the body and says, 'It feels like a wall.' That's where we are with this."

For Ortiz, there is an obvious reason to address shortcomings in the student record.





Dale Allen and Lillian Ortiz, both vice presidents at Quinsigamond, sometimes come at the issue from different angles — he from the employer's perspective, she from the student's — but both support the effort to revamp the student record.



Faith Wong, director of career services and a member of the transcript transition committee at QCC, presents a mockup of the new-look transcript, this one for fictional student John Doe.

"We have over 40 student clubs on campus," she points out. "The problem is students are graduating, seeking employment and not having all of their college experience recorded in one place. All of these students are very active and involved in the community. And it's not showing up on their transcripts."

A co-curricular transcript is a logical progression for a school led by a data-driven president who presses staff, faculty and students alike to "think entrepreneurially."

"It's an attractive target," Allen says of the reformed transcript. But no one at QCC believes for a moment that hitting the bull's-eye will be easy.

"We're at a very rudimentary stage, and we are feeling our way through this," Carberry acknowledges. "For us, very honestly, we need to find out from employers and the baccalaureate schools where we send our students what they want to know and how we can facilitate their selection process and what we can do to make (the transcript) more meaningful. Otherwise the transcript will be populated with a lot of nothing."

Assessing 'John Doe'

In late summer, a mock QCC transcript-of-the-future began circulating within the development team. The rough draft, on paper, is a relic of the pre-digital age. The finished product will adapt to the times.

"(Students) don't want to deal with paper," Allen says. "We need to be more adaptive to the technology that rules the way we do things today."

The mock document — a co-curricular transcript prepared for "John Doe" — is essentially an addendum, something to supplement the fictional student's official record. It testifies to Doe's membership in the Chess Club, Student Senate, PTK and the Judicial Board; it shows that he volunteered at a pair of fundraisers, a bowl-a-thon and a charity cookout; it says he received "leadership training" at student government and PTK seminars and earned "service learning" credits in a Boys & Girls Club internship.

It also notes that Phi Theta Kappa honored Doe with a "Gold Stole Award." But it doesn't say what Doe did to merit the citation — or even explain the award's significance. And it makes no attempt to identify actual learning outcomes — the specific knowledge, skills or abilities that Doe obtained or honed through this experience.

Director of Career Services Faith Wong, part of the transcript transition committee, admits that these shortcomings pose a problem. In fact, she says they represent "the perfect example of the work that needs to be done" to upgrade student records.

In the case of John Doe, she says PTK adviser Bonnie Coleman might be able to provide some answers. Correct. "The Gold Stole recipient means a student has done his Phi Theta Kappa community service," Coleman explained.

Coleman has her own method of storing the recorded activity of PTK students. It's called a file cabinet. It's not that Coleman is technologically averse or digitally challenged

(she backs up the information on a hard drive). It's just that the current configuration of QCC technology makes it easier to keep records the old-fashioned way.

"A lot of students come back to me after three or four years to say, 'I'm continuing my education; can you write me a letter of recommendation?'" Coleman says, pulling a file drawer open for inspection. "And I'm like, 'Who are you?' So we keep records of everything that is important in here."

That process grows more cumbersome by the year. PTK had 30 members when Coleman took over in 2007, a number that has since swelled to more than 400. As membership has grown, so has number of projects, fundraisers and volunteer activities that must fit in the filing cabinet. And though the co-curricular transcript will make documentation easier, the logistics of implementing that system pose a different set of questions.

"Who's in charge of (entering the information into the database)?" Coleman asks. "I would know if someone was on the basketball team. But if a student says: 'I (volunteered

with Joe Schmoie, am I responsible for calling this person to verify that information?'"

The answer to that question has already been determined: It will fall to each student to add to the record whatever information he or she sees fit. Students will be encouraged, as a hedge against memory lapses, to input information in real time, as it happens — a method encouraged by Kevin Kruger, president of NASPA – Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education. "It needs to be an ongoing tool, not a summative tool," says Kruger, a strong advocate of student record reform.

QCC has not yet determined how much information the transcript should convey to third parties. For instance, will it be enough to simply note that a student volunteered at a holiday party for underprivileged Worcester-area children? Or should the transcript include a link showing that the student baked and iced eight dozen Christmas tree cookies, dressed as an elf to distribute toys and afterward drove three families home in a blinding snowstorm?



Phi Theta Kappa (PTK) adviser Bonnie Coleman (right) shows Cherise Connolly the old-school, non-digital documentation of Connolly's involvement with PTK. Connolly, a dual-enrollment student at Quinsigamond, is a senior at Shrewsbury High School.

Butler, the associate dean of students, believes QCC should take advantage of the technology and allow students to divulge as much information as they wish. He reasons that “a few clicks of the computer shouldn't matter” to someone interested in seeing the full scope of a student's commitment to service and learning.

Fitzgerald-Jenkins, however, fears information overload. “I do think there need to be some parameters or some order to it,” says the Quinsigamond registrar. “It's one thing to know that a student worked in a soup kitchen. But do we need to know if he peeled the potatoes and washed the pots and pans?”

The verification issue

Determining the proper level of detail is clearly an issue that must be resolved, but it may seem a trivial one compared to the challenge of verifying all of those details. After all, even though students themselves are entering the data, that information doesn't belong solely to them. In fact, the document that ultimately displays that information will technically remain the property of the institution.

That means Quinsigamond Community College will be accountable for the content shared with human resources professionals, four-year universities and graduate schools.

Fitzgerald-Jenkins points out that verification never posed a problem in the past. “If it's on an academic

transcript, then it's verified,” the registrar says. “I believe students are honest. But not always.”

Carberry agrees that verification is vital — to students and to the institution. “It isn't just developing the template around which we must insert information,” the QCC president says. “The validation of that (information) becomes a driver.”

As an example, she cites a multifaceted Phi Theta Kappa project to raise \$100,000 for a bookmobile to promote youth literacy in low-income Worcester neighborhoods.

“There is student turnover during the course of the three-year project,” she explains. “We can document that they were part of the honors society that accomplished these goals. But how active each one of them has been? That's not something we can capture at this point.”

In the case of the bookmobile project and most other activities, the task of verifying student-provided content will likely rest with the activity organizers and other adult leaders — club and organization advisers, coaches, and faculty members who integrate service learning into their courses.

Carberry admits the new system may eventually add to faculty workload, though she says that hasn't yet become an issue, even though QCC is in the midst of a hiring freeze necessitated by decreased enrollment. Cuts in state funding for higher education are also a consideration. All of these factors keep QCC officials mindful that the effort to upgrade the transcript cannot occur in a vacuum.



Associate Dean of Enrollment and Student Services and Registrar Tara Fitzgerald-Jenkins, a higher-ed administrator with 30 years' experience, has her doubts about QCC's effort to reform the student record system. She cites two main concerns: the danger of information overload and the difficulty of verifying the data being entered.



Kayla Paterson, here working as a tutor in Quinsigamond's Communications Skills Center, will be credited for that work on the college's new-look transcript.

Quinsigamond and a handful of other institutions are clearly at the forefront of transcript-reform movement. But its long-term effectiveness depends on the willingness of colleges large and small to embrace that movement.

"It's expensive to do these plug-ins and improvements at any college, let alone across higher ed. And there's a choice here," says Allen. "The question is, if there are 20 things that need to be a part of all electronic transcripts in the future, how do we plug those 20 things into anybody's system? I'd love to work with our friends on the digital side with that because our friends in the marketplace would be so much better because of it."

Another, even larger, issue looms as well: How will the information contained in these new-look, digital transcripts — at whatever level of detail — convey what really matters? How will they demonstrate the specific knowledge and skills that a student has obtained or developed through the work described?

That knotty problem, perhaps the ultimate question in the student record reform effort, is a long way from being resolved. But work is certainly underway to formulate some answers (see DQP story on Page 18).

Much of this work is being driven by a job market that is increasingly hungry for ways to assess the intangible assets known as "soft skills" — communications proficiency, teamwork, leadership and the like.

"A lot of what employers want today goes beyond academic competencies," Allen says. "They want

someone who knows how to be part of a team, knows how to show up on time, be presentable and play well in the sandbox. We need to find a way for those things to show up in the (new) transcript."

Solidifying the 'soft skills'

Allen adds that students in certificate programs, particularly in the health, information technology and manufacturing fields, are "demanding and craving that (soft skills) show up on transcripts. And it's just not happening. ... All that shows up on our transcript today is that (a student) completed a three-credit course."

It will take some time and more than a few adjustments, but Carberry believes Quinsigamond will emerge from the effort with an updated transcript that meets the needs of 21st century students and employers.

"These are interesting times," she says. "And in interesting times you have to move faster than you have in the past."

You also have to face tough questions head-on. And Carberry herself poses a big one: "Are employers and four-year schools going to take the time, and will they be willing to assess a different, bigger and stronger representation of students?" If so, she adds, "there is going to have to be a huge cultural shift as things are implemented. It has to start somewhere. Being at the front end has its risks. But it also has its rewards. Or at least we're hoping so." ■



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