

After SHIFT Happens 2:

Interview between National Laboratory for Education Transformation (NLET)'s Gordon Freedman and Innovate+Educate (I+E)'s Dr. Merrilea Mayo



Freedman: Great report - hits the nail on the head in terms of shift from degree to assessments and certifications - what's next after your report?

Mayo: One thing this report really did for us was make us aware of just how many people and institutions were now converging on a competency-based education and employment system. We woke up and realized there is now a sizeable market out there for competency-related tools and products.

So, if you're asking what's next for I+E, we have to find a way to get some of the nascent technology out to a marketplace that now exists. I+E itself has developed a lot of prototype tools, but the problem is that non-profits can't really get tools out in the marketplace. You can't go back to nonprofit funders and ask for support to get your tools out there, because you need an infrastructure that lasts beyond a grant's 3 year timeline. Commercial offerings also need things that grants don't support – things like advertising budgets, salespeople, on-demand technical support, and ongoing code maintenance. So the next step for I+E is figuring out how to get everyone's tools out there and used in a more commercial and consistent way.

Freedman: Your report is a startling summation of trends we all hear about, but the way you write about it, it sounds like the balance is shifting toward assessments-for-work and certifications reflecting work as a norm. Is the shift really happening? How do you know?

Mayo: The data say, yes, this is happening. The crux of it all will be the employers – how fast they will recognize things like certifications as alternatives to degrees (e.g. will they list a job opening as requiring “either certification X or degree Y”). Employer adoption will dictate how fast the competency-based education system will move to intercept. Since the report was really all about the supply

side, we didn't say much about the demand side of the equation. But there a couple of anecdotes that illustrate the take-up on the demand side.

First, the US Chamber of Commerce, under its Data Jobs Exchange (JDX) effort, is putting together an API that will allow various web-based applications to talk to each other in the language of competencies. This is a huge step forward. It's like stringing telephone wires between companies, and between houses and companies, so all applications can “talk competencies” to each other. And what's even more impressive is the size of the players at the JDX table. Department of Education. Department of Defense. Office of Personnel Management. Google. JP Morgan Chase. WalMart Foundation. OK, you've got my attention now.

The second data point I have on employer adoption is more personal. It goes back to when we were trying to figure out what to call this “thing” we were asking employers to do – namely, to hire people based on what they could prove they could do, rather than on the basis of a one-word degree title on a piece of paper. We went through various names, but I eventually argued for the phrase “skills based hiring,” because it had zero Google hits at the time, and so if anyone started using this unusual combination of words, we'd know that they somehow got the idea from us, directly or indirectly. (“Competency-based hiring,” which was a close second, had 2 hits).

We also wrote a Wikipedia article to put a stake in the ground for the phrase, “skills-based hiring” defining what it meant. So...I googled the phrase today. It had 261 MILLION hits!

Freedman: How do we get the word out to people that a) there are jobs and b) there are assessments and certifications to get that work?

Mayo: When people look for work, they ask friends they know for leads, they look at job advertisements posted in doors of local businesses, and they look at online job postings. Applying because of a sign on a door is particularly prevalent among opportunity youth, who tend not to have the professional connections that allow them entrée to middle-class jobs, nor a car to drive beyond their neighborhood. Online job postings tend to be the domain of higher income, degreed workers. Family and friends are used as resources by both. To get the message out, these major routes to job information now have to mention degree alternatives in their communications. This means:

- If you are an occupation-centered nonprofit – say, healthcare or science professional society – read up on what assessments are now available for hiring in your field, then publicize those at a professional society meeting where employers can talk about which alternatives

they use and value. Your attendees will then know to relay all the options available, when a neighbor's son asks, "Hey how do you get a job in your occupation?" The answer won't be limited to just "get a degree, assuming your parents can afford it." A degree is great. It's just not possible for a lot of folks.

- If you are an employer, go to <https://www.careeronestop.org/Toolkit/Training/find-certifications.aspx> and search for the certifications available for the job openings you're hiring in. Find the exam manual associated with those certifications and see if it covers the skills you'd want in an employee. If it does, list the certification(s) in the job announcement as an alternative to a degree (assuming the job is not one that legally requires a degree). This will rapidly close the skills gap between applicants and job requirements, as well as open up your job to thousands of folks who may have the skills (usually from prior work experience) but not the degree.
- If you are a workforce agency with your own job board/job posting/job matching service, then every time your staff are posting jobs for an employer, train them to ask, "would you like to include a degree alternative with that posting?" It could be an employer-offered qualifying exam, a 3rd party professional certification, a job tryout, an apprenticeship. Something that opens the door. Start the conversation, then help employers meet your target demographic in a way that works for both.

Freedman: Outside of tech, where do you think the first true success will emerge where the college degree is no longer the entry ticket?

Mayo: Well, the biggest one for a long time has been trucking. It's a huge industry, those jobs pay well, and all you need is a commercial driver's license to get into it. Four weeks of training, an exam, and you're done. More generally, occupations that are growing faster than their labor supply are much more open to using certifications and alternative qualification routes to find new employees. That's why uptake has been much larger in tech than other fields.

Another field where certification is growing, is health-care. The higher ranked positions (nurses, doctors) all require degrees, mostly because licensing boards say you have to have a degree before they'll allow you to take the licensing exam. But at the lower end, you're starting to see certifications in demand for patient care technicians, medical assistants, medical administrative specialists, biomedical equipment technicians and the like.

Freedman: Who are good sources of data that can be cited where a decline in degrees (dropouts) leads to rise in assessments or certification?

Mayo: It's not a zero-sum game. As assessments and certifications rise, you do not see degrees fall. The one is not eating the lunch of the other. Instead the whole pie of trained people is growing. People who couldn't afford a degree under any circumstances, who were never in the degree market (though some thought they were and might have tried for a semester), are finally getting something else they can use to get a job. The only time I ever saw a

pattern even remotely like what you describe was during the 2008-2010 economic downturn. During that time, people who couldn't get jobs went back to school: there were significant increases in both certificates and associates degrees during this time frame. However, certificates grew faster than AA degrees (they normally grow at the same rate), presumably because people were looking for a cheaper fix to their employment woes. But both grew – and when the economic stress went away, the AA degree and certificates went back to tracking each other's growth rates.

Freedman: One of the most troubling segments in the unemployment sector are youth 16 to 24 who are not in any form of education and are not working. This is a very hard segment to inform. What would you say to unemployed youth who maybe have given up looking for work and don't know where to get the training or testing they need?

Mayo: Don't put this problem on them. This is not their problem to solve, by somehow becoming "better people." It is our problem that we can't recognize what's already there. In our blind paternalism, we keep providing more training, thinking "they just need our help." They don't need our paternalistic help. They certainly don't need training that an employer will never see on a resume, or consider valuable, even if that training does provide real skills, invisibly, under the hood.

Like all of us, opportunity youth need a more open, more transactional system they can navigate on their own without having to use money or pre-existing professional connections as levers. The system is just more obviously not working for them, because they don't have other resources or strings to pull, to help compensate for all the obstacles and complexity.

Freedman: What is the future of a traditional four year degree?

Mayo: I think it is a mistake to think the 4 year degree is dead, or even dying. In its current form, it will probably be stable for at least 2 decades. A whole other universe will open up around it, but it will remain. One thing a degree does very well is train people to finally be able to learn on their own, without help. That is crucial to this new economy we're talking about.

Eighty percent of those using MOOCs already have degrees; they've learned how to learn on their own. A liberal arts degree also helps instill many of the soft skills employers crave. Unfortunately, until competencies came along, we had no way to quantify or advertise this – and so everyone still wonders what a liberal arts degree is good for. So, let me emphasize that degrees are not dead. But they will be one player amongst many, which means they will have to play to their strengths, instead of assuming they're the only game in town.

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