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Educating the Provosts

New fellowship for chief academic officers focuses on digital courseware.

By Scott Jaschik

In previous generations, the prime educational materials in higher education were to be found in libraries and laboratories. These days of course, digital materials are crucial -- to teaching, learning and assessment. But do senior academic leaders know the questions they should be asking about these digital educational tools?

The Association of Chief Academic Officers last week [announced](#) a new fellowship program for 30 provosts -- with support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Kenneth C. Green, founding director of the Campus Computing Project, will serve as the director of the Digital Fellows Program. CAOs who are interested in the fellowship may express interest via email to fellowship@acao.org.

Laura Niesen de Abruna, president of the Association of Chief Academic Officers and provost of York College of Pennsylvania, responded via email to questions about the new fellowship.



Laura Niesen de Abruna

Q: Why focus on the provost? Many provosts have designated a vice provost or someone else to take charge instructional innovation and digital learning initiatives. Why is it important for the provost to be as informed and involved in these campus efforts and investments efforts as this initiative suggests they can (and perhaps should) be?

A: We know that at many institutions, and especially among public comprehensive institutions and community colleges, the chief academic officer sets the academic and instructional priorities for initiatives that will be pursued during his or her tenure. Typically a CAO will focus on such issues as enhancing undergraduate teaching, student research or internship opportunities, internationalization, or service learning as part of their personal visions and institutional goals.

Our research indicates many CAOs are not familiar with the potential for digital pedagogy to improve undergraduate learning, retention, and persistence to graduation for their students. Although CAOs have come of age, both personally and professionally, with the technologies that are now ubiquitous across higher education, many remain skeptical about the impact and benefits of the often significant campus investments in instructional technology intended to improve student learning and institutional outcomes.

We hope that as CAOs better understand the link between effective digital pedagogical resources, student engagement, retention, and degree completion, digital pedagogy will move higher on the list of initiatives that are personally important to chief academic officers.

Q: Do you consider the needs of provosts different in terms of type of institution (ones that caters to at risk students vs. elite students)?

A: The academic and instructional priorities of chief academic officers may differ dramatically depending on the type of college, the mission of the institution, and the profile of the student population. The colleges and universities that serve large numbers of Pell-eligible, first generation, low income, or minority students will, understandably, focus more intentionally on access, retention, and persistence to graduation. For these reasons, the ACAO project will focus primarily, but not exclusively, on provosts and CAOs at public comprehensives and community colleges.

Q: How strong a link do you see between educational materials (digital and otherwise) and student success?

A: There is a growing body of research which confirms that students can and do learn more and pass more courses if they have access to effective digital course materials and experiences that

personalize the learning experience. The challenge has been to get the attention of CAOs nationwide to focus on this research, to bring it to their faculty, and to apply it at their institutions.

Consequently, ACAO plans to provide a professional development experience that will bring the knowledge commonly shared among instructional technology advocates – often but not always engaged faculty and instructional designers – directly to provosts who are not typically immersed in this research literature or these communities of interest, and who typically do not attend the relevant professional conferences and related meetings.

Q: Are there a few institutions you consider models in this area?

A: There are a number of two- and four-year colleges and universities that are making effective use of digital courseware and related digital resources and strategies to personalize student learning – and doing so with impressive results. Some widely recognized examples include Arizona State University, Broward Community College, Saint Leo University, Southern New Hampshire University, the University of Central Florida, and the University of Texas at Arlington. The initiatives and activities at these six very different institutions, which serve a wide range of students, are not isolated in silos but rather reflect a clear institutional vision, strategy, and commitment.

Source: <https://www.insidehighered.com/digital-learning/article/2017/01/30/new-fellowship-will-train-provosts-digital-courseware>
