

Create Opportunity and Validate Learning with Online Metrics—Lessons from a Career Skills Educator

Take 17,000 students, ranging from 6th grade to adult. Teach them in 300 different learning programs. Cover dozens of professional skills. Validate those skills for prospective employers. And prove the success of your program for continued funding. Sounds daunting? Michelle Keylon's organization must do all of these things, every year.

Over the past two years, Keylon has been instrumental in helping the Oklahoma Department of Career and Technology Education's (ODCTE) CareerTech system streamline the way it serves students, the state, and the business community. Keylon is State Program Administrator for Business and Information Technology Education, a department within ODCTE that serves roughly 17,000 of the Oklahoma CareerTech system's 465,000 annual enrollments. Her department continually struggles to document skills development across a variety of subjects. Her challenge is one encountered by businesses and government agencies as well as educational institutions—capture value, validate learning, and don't break the bank in the process.

"We needed to organize our testing strategy to accommodate a wide selection of skills," says Keylon. "We needed a metric for proving our success and gaining funding, and we needed certifications for many different skills that students could take to the employer marketplace. Our online assessment and certification system gives us all of these advantages."

Single-source Platform Streamlines Skills Assessments

Still in its first year of operation, CareerTech's skills measurement system has garnered widespread adoption by students and teachers alike. "One of the basic features we needed for our students was a common certification resource," says Keylon. "Take a basic computer skill such as Microsoft Word. With programs spread throughout the department, we would have different teachers giving their students different tests. There was little consistency over what was being taught and what was being measured. These inconsistencies hindered our ability to demonstrate our success. This was a big challenge."

One solution for consistent assessment is the industry exam. Microsoft certifications are a well known example, and Keylon points out that there are numerous other types of tests, including health certifications, trade certifications, and safety standards. Unfortunately, the certification process can be inconvenient and expensive, costing several hundred dollars per student.

"While all of the different industry certifications are still available," she says, "we now have a skills measurement system that includes those topics and also measures and certifies nearly every skill we teach through a single online source. The results are instant, and because it's in a single system, those results can be tracked across our whole program."

Assessments Provide Learning Framework

With dozens of courses covering various levels of professional skill taught through nearly 300 learning programs, Keylon's department must continuously develop assessment objectives that correspond to course requirements and the skill needs of the hiring companies. "The online system offers relevant test topics," Keylon explains. "As teachers struggle to keep pace with the changing technologies for their curriculums, the test outlines give them the basics for class development as well as a testing tool that students can use in the classroom."

"We rely heavily on the flexibility of the online system," says Keylon. "We can aggregate the skills tests from our online assessment system to cover the needs of any course. Take the course 2D/3D artist, for example. With no industry certification even available, we put several of our online assessments together to create a certification."

ODCTE's system mirrors a role-based skills assessment strategy that is gaining wider acceptance among corporate organizations. Assessments for individual skills that apply to a specific job role are aggregated to create a more comprehensive job role assessment or certification. The result is a highly effective measure of ability across multiple job-related skills. For more about job role-based skills measurement, see *Strategy and Tactics*, in our January 2003 issue, available at www.brainbench.com/business.

Objective Skills Metrics Provide Critical Data for Grant Submissions and Funding

One of the most pressing challenges for Keylon's department as well as the ODCTE is funding. "Validation is essential," says Keylon. "Our organization is a separate state agency and is not under the Oklahoma State Department of Education. We have to fight for our own funding, and we have to validate the results of our training. We needed a way to capture what we do across all our courses."

The online system provides critical data for grant submissions. Assessment results provide a high level of detail and objectivity across the entire range of skills being tracked, and because they are delivered through a single source, apples-to-apples score comparisons can be made on a year-to-year basis to track performance.

"Thanks to the online system, we can now roll up and report current skills levels across all of our courses," Keylon explains. "And we look forward to using the same system to show growth in the future. This is not only critical to our ability to secure state funds but also to our ability to secure funding from the federal Carl Perkins Act."

Assessment Program Gains Support Among Students and Teachers

"Whenever you implement a program, you can't take user acceptance for granted," says Keylon. "Teacher resistance to new tests is understandably high, and we didn't want to scare our students away."

To overcome these challenges, the Business and Information Technology Education department required a high level of communication. Keylon and her staff have visited every one of more than 300 learning programs in the organization to gain teacher acceptance. So far, her efforts are paying off. "The tests in our online system are professional level exams dictated by employers' needs," she says, "and they are very challenging. Both of these aspects attracted our teachers."

The employer-driven nature of the tests has also helped overcome the challenge of student fear. "Our students are motivated," Keylon explains. "People no longer look at job training as an alternative for those who can't go to college. Our services are available to professionals in the marketplace as well as students in the school system. Both seem to be rising to the challenge of the tests, and they are putting in the extra effort to get the certifications."

Moving Ahead—CareerTech Students Take Skills to the Marketplace

As ODCTE introduces online assessments to students and teachers, the success of the program hinges on acceptance from the business community—the people who will ultimately hire CareerTech students. The assessments provide certifications, backed by a global following among skilled professionals and employers, as well as a growing reputation as a difficult accomplishment.

"Our use of online tests captures what business and industry is looking for in Oklahoma as well as across the US," says Keylon. "And now we're tracking an initial positive impact of our online certification in the employer marketplace. The certifications are challenging. If someone came into the office and used those test results to prove their skills, I'd hire them. I think the success of our students in the job marketplace will bear that out."