

Joining the MOOC revolution: SUNY Broome to aid workforce development

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As the population ages, the demand for home healthcare aides and personal care assistants rises in tandem.

And while there is a good deal of training available for HHAs and PCAs, the field has been plagued by high turnover rates. Many potential students for these entry-level positions face significant limitations in financial, transportation and other resources to reliably attend training at a brick-and-mortar institution, and lack a history of academic success.

“There is a lot of training available, but huge turnover,” noted Dr. Andrea C. Wade, Associate Vice President and Dean of Distance Education and Health Sciences.

Enter SUNY Broome’s Massive Open Online Course, or MOOC, which is being unveiled for the first time this summer. The college is among four in the State University of New York system to offer courses through Coursera, along with the University at Albany, the University at Buffalo and Stony Brook University.

The course will run this summer a module a week – there are 12 modules in total – followed by an assessment of the program’s success, Wade told audience members during SUNY Broome’s recent Assessment Day. Eventually, it will move to an on-demand format and be accompanied by an open online textbook.

Ultimately, the MOOC is expected to benefit students, employers and the local community, all central to the community college mission.

A conduit for completion

The first MOOC is believed to be George Siemens and Stephen Downes’ 2008 course “Connectivism and Connective Knowledge,” offered through the University of Manitoba. The format then underwent a period of skyrocketing interest, although the gains weren’t immediately evident.

“We went through MOOC hysteria where everyone wanted one,” Wade said.

Relatively few community colleges have been able to make a connection between their community-focused missions and the MOOC system, which is open and doesn’t lead to educational assessment or certification in the traditional sense.

The spark for SUNY Broome's MOOC came several years ago, when Wade was sitting on the Southern Tier Regional Economic Development Council's healthcare workforce subcommittee. While some participants sought to attract medical specialists, Wade countered that the need for entry-level positions – such as HHAs and PCAs – was greatest.

HHAs and PCAs are typically female, single and possessing a high school education or less. While the positions require job training, only HHAs need certification. Wade's idea: use a MOOC as a prescreening filter – a conduit for the completion of job training.

"Why couldn't we use an open format for people to go and learn about what it takes to do the job?" she asked.

To bring the project to fruition, SUNY Broome was among seven recipients of the 2014 Innovative Instruction Technology Grants (IITG) program, which funds campus innovations and initiatives that enhance online learning for students and have the potential to be brought to scale throughout the SUNY system. The \$20,000 grant supported the development of the project.

The modules were filmed in a rented hotel, made to give a home-like feel. They include not only information and demonstrations, but games to reinforce skills and post-tests. Students can listen to the information or read transcripts, making the material accessible.

The course may be of interest not only to future aides, but anyone involved in caregiving, Wade acknowledged.

Ultimately, SUNY Broome envisions that the HHA/PCA Workforce Development MOOC will lead to the establishment of a web-based Workforce Resource Center that serves as:

- A recruitment tool to educate potential students about the requirements, skills, and employment prospects for the job.
- An open resource for student training with a provision for "badging" as an indicator of progress and successful completion of learning objectives.
- A conduit for successful MOOC completers to enroll in approved training programs local to the students.
- A virtual location for employers to post job opportunities and for graduates to search for opportunities.

Work continues on the MOOC, and the project has received another grant. Wade herself, however, is leaving the college this summer to become the new Provost and Vice President of Academic Services at Monroe Community College.

However, she will remain involved with the continued development of HHA/PCA MOOC, an opportunity she appreciates.

"I get to stay involved with it, with the team here," she said.

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