

# ALIGNING COMPETENCY FRAMEWORKS AND CO-CURRICULAR EXPERIENCES: AN INTERACTIVE EXPERIENCE WITH THE SUITABLE TECHNOLOGY PLATFORM

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Extended Abstract

Innovations and Future Directions in Education Track

## ABSTRACT

Schools embed learning objectives in their courses and co-curricular activities, but often they have difficulty determining if students are mastering stated objectives. Research suggests that the most effective learning competencies should be flexible, stackable, transferable, measurable. In addition, the use of competency frameworks may allow schools to track the skills that students develop through both curricular and co-curricular activities. How to align learning goals and objectives with competency frameworks while collecting student experiences and outcomes data is the focus of this interactive technology demonstration session. Using the technology platform created by the Suitable company, we will examine the use of competency-based frameworks via a demonstration of a technology tool that supports key learning competencies while also employing a “gamification” approach that yields important data for ongoing evaluation and accreditation efforts.

## OVERVIEW

Research on competency-based education has examined the fundamental question of how we know that we are accomplishing our objectives within our courses, curricula, and co-curricular programs (Ford, 2014). One answer lies within situated learning theory which tells us that students don't come to us with equal knowledge and skills. Instead, students acquire knowledge and skills within a specific context that shapes both the content and the process of learning (Cobb, & Bowers, 1999). This perspective reminds us that learning is a social process and requires authentic contexts. This is where experiential learning can provide opportunities for knowledge and skill acquisition (Illeris, 2018).

In the field of management education, situated learning challenges us to see learning not just in insulated classrooms, but in real-world experiences (Bratianu, Stanescu, & Mocanu, 2021). This enables us to create dynamic, complex, social, diverse, and global learning environments both inside and outside of our university walls. To create these environments, we must engage in ongoing dialogue on how we define, develop, and improve our educational impact across all levels—classroom, program, institution, and profession.

## BACKGROUND

Central to this conversation must be a focus on the definition and valuation of specific *competencies* that shape how we design, develop and assess the impact of what we provide to students both inside and outside of the classroom environment (Ford, 2014). This research suggests that competencies are most effective when they are:

- **Flexible:** Targeted competencies should be *adaptive across situations*. In other words, they should take into account student needs and the changing context in which the educational experience takes place.
- **Stackable:** Competencies should outline *clear pathways* toward a valued and validated credential, whether that is a degree, a certificate, or a micro-credential.
- **Transferable:** Competencies can be *applied across different situations*, environments, and fields while maintaining both their relevance and impact.
- **Measurable:** Each competency should contain some *observable or quantifiable evidence* of knowledge acquisition and/or application across various levels of proficiency.

An effective approach would be for institutions to select and pair these competencies within a structure that is relevant to learners, educators, programs, and institutions. However, in practice, many competencies are designed and implemented in a somewhat episodic manner. This sporadic approach might yield an expansive list of desired attributes, but the relevance and

value of those attributes might be unclear to the various stakeholders such as students, recruiters, and parents. In short, evidence-based frameworks are important.

Using competency frameworks may help to define what is to be developed and why it matters (Lozano, Barreiro-Gen, Lozano, & Sammalisto, 2019). They display connections and interrelationships between distinct competencies and outline pathways across various levels of acquisition and accomplishments. Frameworks provide a tool for navigating complex and dynamic environments. In addition, frameworks can challenge us to think about learning outcomes and competencies that may not be developed using traditional classroom structures or pedagogies (Armstrong & Foster, 2021).

## **A TECHNOLOGY-BASED SOLUTION**

To examine one approach, this interactive session will include a demonstration of the student engagement software company that Suitable together with the Pitt Business Outside of the Classroom Curriculum as one example of a framework that outlines competencies that are flexible, stackable, transferable, and measurable. This Suitable framework can include both curricular and co-curricular elements and tracks experiential learning that is then linked to key student outcomes such as engagement, satisfaction, and completion (Morris, 2020). For example, one of Suitable's unique offerings is its "Co-Curricular Transcript", which shows how activities, projects, tasks, and experiences connect to specific competencies across different levels of knowledge acquisition and application. This feature makes any competency framework transparent to institutional leaders, faculty sponsors, employers, recruiters, and students. Student engagement and success are enhanced when all stakeholders understand the link between co-curricular experiences and competencies, because everyone can clearly see what is being taught, what is being learned, and what can be applied (Davis, Good, & Maryott, 2022).

This integration of both curricular and co-curricular learning experiences with a clearly defined competency framework makes the assessment of outcomes and impact straightforward and impactful. One example is from the University of Pittsburgh is the "Outside of the Classroom Curriculum" (OCC). The competency framework outlines a collection of experiences, programs, projects and activities that help students to make the most of their educational experience. Developed as a collaboration between faculty, staff and student leaders, it identifies 10 core competencies that are not only important to the educational experience but also are relevant for students' first destination upon graduation (e.g., employment, advanced degree, public service, business ownership, etc.). Data collected by the University shows that students who complete the OCC show higher 4-year and 6-year graduate rates and report feeling well prepared in interviews for internships, admission to graduate school, and full-time employment (<https://www.studentaffairs.pitt.edu/occ/>).

Within different units at the University of Pittsburgh such as the College of Business Administration, these competencies are flexible and adaptable enough to be customized for the specific needs of business students. In addition to providing a clear pathway of competencies and levels of attainment, this model includes a gamification component that is shown by research to enhance student engagement (Rivera, 2021). Not only has this been an effective approach and tool for student engagement, but this competency framework allows for clear alignment with curriculum redesign, assessment of outcomes and assurance of learning goals. For example, a competency student learning objective such as "analytics and decision-making" or "exposure to diverse and global perspectives" can be linked directly not only to content inside of the classroom coursework, but also to co-curricular activities, projects, and outside of the classroom experiences.

In addition, these competencies are defined across 54 distinct levels of completion: exposure, interaction, participation, engagement expertise and mastery. Across each level and within each competency, students can receive a series of thematic badges that not only serve as micro-credentials but also as feedback to students that outlines the process and pathways to completion. This framework provides the flexibility to stand up or change different competency-based micro-credentials in response to emerging needs within the marketing workplace or the broader social environment (e.g., data analytics, diversity and inclusion, leadership, sustainability). Engagement in the OCC can also be directly linked to measurable outcomes such as engagement in career development, student satisfaction and rate of degree completion as well as used for trend analysis, assurance of learning and ongoing evaluation for required accreditation. Figure 1 below shows an example of the student-view scorecard that capture progress toward the completion of each competency along with any achievements or badges that can be used as micro-credentials that are shown to have positive impact on student outcomes (Rieder, 2022).

## **CONCLUSION**

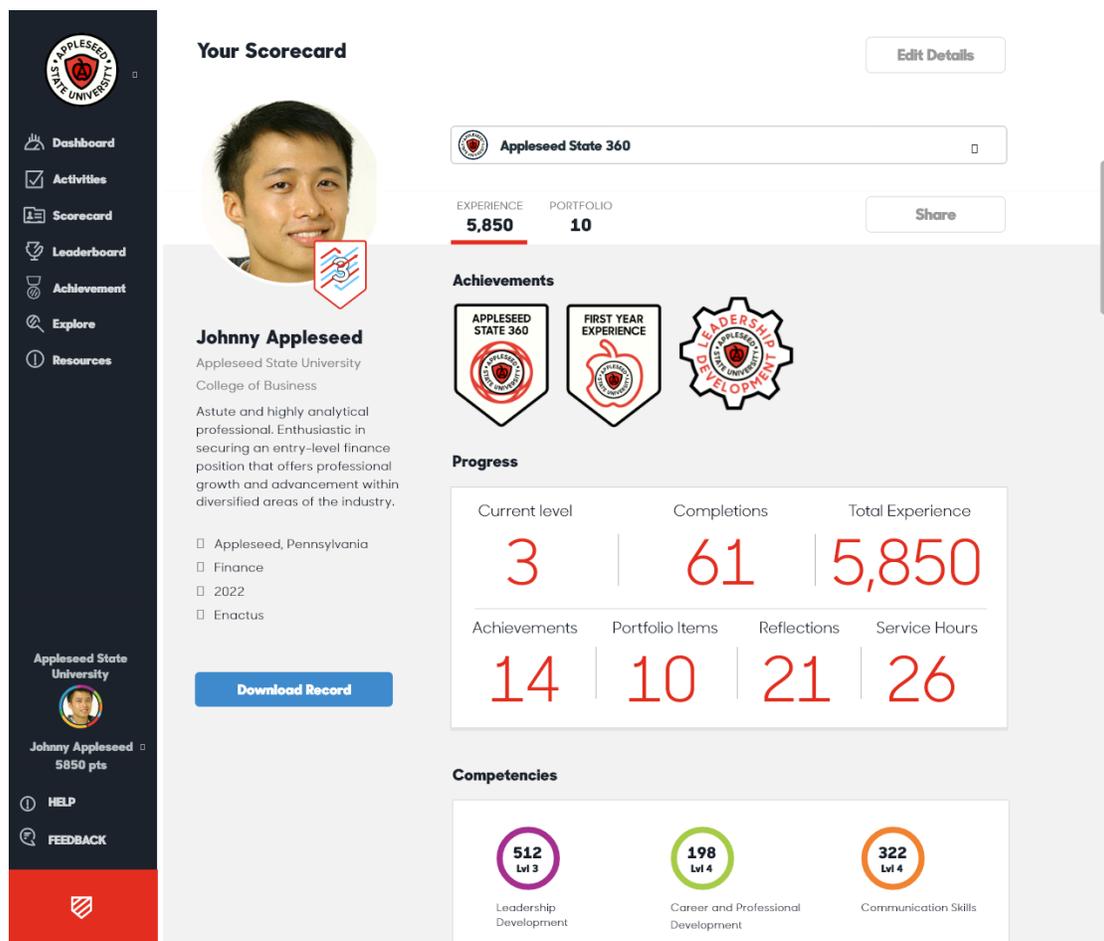
Integrating both curricular and co-curricular learning experiences within a clearly defined competency framework makes the assessment of outcomes and impact straightforward and effective (Petrie, Jones, & Murrell, 2018). The framework is flexible enough to integrate different competency-based micro-credentials in response to emerging needs within the workplace or the broader social environment. A competency-based approach to measure student learning may provide schools both the

structure and the opportunity to conduct assessments, improve programs, and innovate offerings. It may also provide flexibility as different competencies, approaches, and constructs can be evaluated over time for their impact.

A competency-based approach to measuring student learning provides schools both the structure and the opportunity to conduct assessments, improve programs, and innovate offerings. It can also provide flexibility as different competencies, approaches, and constructs can be evaluated over time for learning impact. Using technology with a competency-based approach that aligns with and assesses learning goals both inside and outside of the classroom can provide schools with a roadmap that allows them to navigate uncertainty and dynamic nature of learning and development.

Clearly this is an ongoing process of both development and transformation. The use of competency-based approaches offers both structure as well as the opportunity for assessment, improvement and innovation. It can also allow for flexibility as different competencies, approaches, and structures constructs can be developed based on the existing framework and then evaluated over time for their impact. We often say that the future is filled with “uncertainty”. However, competency-based approaches that both align and assess learning goals both inside and outcomes outside of the classroom may provide a necessary roadmap to not only navigate through uncertainty, but to drive innovation within it.

Figure 1: Example of Student Dashboard



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