Transcription for

THE KEY: INSIDE HIGHER ED

EP. 50: A BETTER 'TRANSCRIPT' FOR LEARNERS AND EMPLOYERS

INSIYA BREAM

MATTHEW PITTINSKY

DOUG LEDERMAN

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DOUG LEDERMAN: What skills, knowledge, and abilities do students develop as they navigate through college? How do students themselves know? And how do institutions arm their graduates to show prospective employers what they know and can do?

Hello, and welcome to this week's episode of The Key, Inside Higher Ed's news and analysis podcast. I'm Doug Lederman, editor and cofounder to Inside Higher Ed, and host of The Key.

In this week's episode, we explore an effort to iterate beyond the academic transcript, which has historically been the main tool available to students, institutions, and employers alike to sum up what's gained during the college experience, and not a very effective one at that.

In this episode, we're joined by Insiya Bream, assistant vice provost for data and systems at the University of Maryland Global Campus, to explain, quote, "the comprehensive learner record" it has created to help its MBA students better capture and describe the full range of competencies and learnings they've developed throughout their educational experience at the institution. Insiya talks among other things about how the learner record can help students translate what they've learned to potential employers and others.

INSIYA BREAM: When we're talking about specifically what is learned in the MBA program, we're giving them specific language right on that document that they can pull into a resume or into an interview,

right? And so it's, and then they don't have to remember, like, you know, when did I learn that? How did I learn that? I mean, it specifically ties, okay, I did this project. This is how I accomplished it, and these were my outcomes. And so it just kind of puts it right in front of them rather than them having to craft their learning and articulating that on their own.

DOUG LEDERMAN: We'll also hear from Matthew Pittinsky, CEO of Parchment, whose credentialing service UMGC uses to deliver its learner record. Matt describes why a more dynamic transcript, which is often discussed in the context of professionally focused learning like at UMGC, could actually help liberal art institutions make their case for the value of what they do.

MATTHEW PITTINSKY: That if you are a believer in the value of a liberal arts education because of all of these skills that it develops, then you should be at the front of the line in insisting that your institution innovate its records to reflect those skills, to reflect those learning outcomes.

DOUG LEDERMAN: Before we get started, a reminder to subscribe to The Key podcast on Apple or Google Podcasts, or your favorite podcast platform. And a shout-out to Wiley Education Services, the sponsor of this week's podcast. Here's a word from them.

TODD ZIPPER: Hi, I'm Todd Zipper, president of Wiley Education Services. This episode is brought to you by my new podcast, An Educated Guest. Be sure to check it out. I will be bringing together great minds in higher ed to dive deep into the innovations and trends that will guide the future of education and careers. No small talk, just big ideas. Subscribe and listen on Apple Podcast, Spotify, or wherever you listen to your favorite podcasts.

DOUG LEDERMAN: On to today's guests, Insiya Bream of the University of Maryland Global Campus, and Matt Pittinsky of Parchment. Insiya and Matt, welcome to The Key, and thanks for being here.

INSIYA BREAM: Thank you for having us.

DOUG LEDERMAN: Insiya, if you could maybe tell us, start by telling us a little bit about the project that you've got underway at UMGC, what its goals are, and how it's going so far.

INSIYA BREAM: UMGC worked on developing a comprehensive learner record. And in my mind, the definition of what a comprehensive learner record is really depends on your institution and what you want it to mean to your students. So for our student population, over 80 percent of our student population is either working full-time or part-time, so they have some sort of connection to employers. They're continuing their education for a very specific reason.

And so our entire goal of this project was to provide them without additional record that they can actually do a couple of things with. One is really share the credentials that they earn at UMGC easily with whoever they need to share it with. And secondly, and most importantly, to really articulate their skills in terms of what they're learning, and to be able to communicate that to others, so that they can easily reach their goals and their next steps.

And for us, you know, we used as a starting point, our students who are in our master's of business administration programs. And the reason that we did that is because, again, first of all, the coursework is just a really nice fit to what a comprehensive learner record can bring. And again, at the graduate level, these students are coming back for further education to really build on their skills and learning to really get to their next steps.

DOUG LEDERMAN: Matt, can you put what University of Maryland Global Campus is doing in some national context for us, based on your work trying to improve the translation of what happens academically and otherwise on college campuses?

MATTHEW PITTINSKY: Absolutely. When you look at a University of Maryland Global Campus comprehensive learner record, two things will stand out. One is it's very visual, so it's much easier to make sense of, and two is it goes deeper than a traditional transcript. As described, it presents the competency information and learning outcomes that that student has achieved. That's what a transcript is supposed to be about, that's what a credential is supposed to be about. It's supposed to summarize what we know and how well we know it, not as deeply as an e-portfolio, where you're getting into all the different evidence and artifacts, but certainly more than just courses and credits.

So this idea of a comprehensive learner record is that we should innovate the transcript. We know so much more about the co-curricular, and internship, and competency, and the broader educational experience that a student goes through than what we include in our transcript. And we're in a time when employers and the connection of higher education into employment is so prominent as a focus for institutions that by innovating the record, we don't just kind of meet students where we should be

meeting them, which is summarizing all that they've learned, but we give them a record that I think is much more responsive to what employers are interested in, which, again, isn't simply courses and credits, that's important to other institutions if you're transferring or going on to graduate school. They want to know what have you learned and how well you've learned it, not in both traditional courses, but also things like leadership, communication, you know, those softer skills.

DOUG LEDERMAN: This is likely to be, if not new terrain, but probably somewhat unfamiliar terrain for a lot of our listeners. I guess I'm curious if you can go into a little more detail around what's required to populate a better transcript? What kind of information gets pulled? How much of that information preexisted the creation of the learner record? Where does it come from, and who needs to participate in it to make it all happen? Insiya, if you could start from the UMGC standpoint...

INSIYA BREAM: Yeah, so what it really comes down to is the data, the data that's available on your students and their progress, and where that lives, and how easily you can take that data and put it into a digital format. Because I think something that most institutions battle with today is that they have multiple systems. So they have a student information system, a learning management system, a document management system, and all of that houses different components of who that student is and what they're learning.

And so, you know, I think for us what really helped was that we had a data warehouse, where the information about a student and their progress is housed, and we could pull from there in terms of their projects, their competencies, their learning, their courses, where they are in their progression, and that all becomes the record.

Ultimately, I think what's important is that this sort of information is sharable--so it's sharable with other institutions, it's sharable with other organizations. And so at the end of the day, it really just comes down to the data and the data that's available.

DOUG LEDERMAN: So that is maybe true at a place like UMGC, where you've probably already built into every course or most courses competencies, and then perhaps judged or shown how much and how successful the students have mastered those. I'm not sure those data exist around the rest of higher education, so again, maybe Matt, maybe you can jump in and talk about sort of how translatable is this idea to a four-year undergraduate liberal arts institution where most of the activity takes place in person except for the last year. I'm guessing that there's a bunch of places where all these data don't exist already.

MATTHEW PITTINSKY: I think that's very fair, and it's one of the key questions when it comes to adoption. It's not uncommon for a provost or a president to see a CLR and say, I want that. That's just beautiful. I want my students when they show up, using, for example, a traditional four-year liberal arts college, when they show up as a freshman, I want them to see that as the pallet upon which they're going to paint. I want them to see that this is what we're going to be able to produce for them on the other side that's going to advance their education and career goals. And that is a very motivating factor to draw them in to the campus to produce that kind of a record. I think more than your tone might indicate.

I mean, in liberal arts colleges, thanks to the leadership of AACU, we have this notion of high-impact practices. Already in the context of accreditation, the degree programs, the curricula are organized into themes in many institutions. Lots of institutions for a while have tracked co-curricular participation in more formal ways, from University of Pittsburgh to Elon to Oklahoma and others. And so it's certainly fair to say that not every institution has, certainly not the breadth of institutions that have courses and credits and grades, but many have.

And the last piece I would share is a CLR, again, as Insiya mentioned, means different things to different institutions. It's ultimately about innovating the transcript. So for some it may very well be presenting traditional transcript data in more insightful ways. So, for example, you could show a pie chart of courses taken by subject matter. You can show achievement over time so it's clearer than a traditional GPA at the end, how a student may have done poorly in their first semester, but then improved over time and at a pretty high level. You can show how the student performed within grade distributions, if that's something your institutions does. So we expect for some institutions the CLR will be a visual representation of traditional transcript data to make more, in a more sensible way for an employer. For other institutions, it will expand the content and the depth of information that's available in a transcript, as UMGC has.

DOUG LEDERMAN: So you're saying it's not hard to be better than the transcript, and there are just all sorts of ways that one might do that.

That's right. I mean,the transcript is this really low-fidelity record relative to the high-fidelity amount of information that universities have about what students do and how well they do it, and the learning outcomes from their programs. It's not hard to make a transcript a little bit higher fidelity than what it is today.

DOUG LEDERMAN: But there's a potentially really big continuum about what that might look like.

MATTHEW PITTINSKY: There is a big continuum. And just to be clear, what Parchment does and our technology in the CLR service is in many ways, it's sort of like a microphone at a concert. It's like the least important part of the concert, right, it's the musician and the experience. But then again, if the microphone and the sound system don't work well, you know, it's not going to be a great concert. If you don't ultimately produce it in a record, you've really lost a big impact of what you're doing. But, of course, the real work is the work of program design and assessment and all the stuff that is ultimately being summarized in that record.

DOUG LEDERMAN: Right. Insiya, you want to jump back in?

INSIYA BREAM: Yeah, so actually, I want to point out that there's a very specific reason that we started with our MBA program. Now, I will say that, you know, we are a very large school, so it still gave us a really nice sample size of about 5,000 students. But it's a transition for us. And so we picked that program because, you know, because it was set to sort of represent a digital record like the CLR. But what it also did was by having that starting point, we were able to kind of use that now moving forward as we continue to develop, like a way that we need to actually structure our curriculum and our data behind the scenes to be able to continue to build on something like this. So I think to Matt's point, I mean, for us, even for us, it's a starting point, and we can now use it to continue to get our data, our curriculum, our learning outcomes in shape to be able to support other digital initiatives as well.

DOUG LEDERMAN: So the CLR might look different even within UMGC, by school or by program.

INSIYA BREAM: Absolutely.

DOUG LEDERMAN: Got it. So how much, thinking about all the constituents on a campus, what changes in behavior, who has to do things differently to make this work? Is it from the student to the faculty to the recordkeeping administrative functions? Whose jobs or whose work and whose behavior has to change, and where in your experimentation so far, Insiya, have you seen snags, or where do you feel like there's the most movement that needs to happen?

INSIYA BREAM: In my mind, this is really an end-to-end change. So I think, you know, from the minute that you intake a student into an institution to help them kind of understand what this record is, how you use it, what it can do for you, I think that's just a fundamental kind of how you advise students and teach them what something like this is. And then I think for most schools when it comes to the registrar world, it's a really a kind of change in thinking how we sort of represent a student's learning, right? The transcripts date back to, I don't know, the 18th century maybe, and the format really, I think in mind hasn't changed much. So, I think, you know, from there it's a change then, and it goes all the way to graduation when you're distributing credentials to a student. So for me, it's really, I think it's an entire university mindset shift that needs to take place in order to sort of adapt these types of practices within your institution, and then help teach students what this is all about, why we're doing it, and what it enables the student to do.

DOUG LEDERMAN: I'm talking to Insiya Bream from the University of Maryland Global Campus and Matt Pittinsky of Parchment.

Matt, thinking again about your sort of broader system view, one of the challenges in higher education is the great diffusion of institutions and the fact that so many different institutions to so many different things differently, and that creates issues when you're talking about cross-institutional movement, which we're obviously seeing more of. How, talk a little bit about sort of how something like the comprehensive learner record is designed to sort of overcome that diffusion, and what has to happen systemically, or maybe ecosystemically for it to actually take hold broadly?

MATTHEW PITTINSKY: It's a great question, and I think it calls out two things that are in tension with each other.

The first is higher ed is very diverse and a big idea of the CLR is that it's a reflection of the charter and the distinctiveness of the university that's issuing it. So if I went to UMGC, I would expect to get something similar to what they're producing in terms of this focus on competency that have been assessed, you know, aligned with my career goals. I went to, as an undergraduate, not too far away, American University, and there the promise was Washington will be your campus, you know, internships, you're going to study the liberal arts, but you're going to do it within professional schools around international service, or communication, or public affairs. And so one would expect in an AU comprehensive learner record would track that and report that as an official document on behalf of the institution. And so CLRs have, exactly as you described, a diversity in forms and formats.

Now, that is in tension to the fact that nobody wants to get a record and have to spend 30 minutes to orient themselves to it, right? That doesn't scale. So if I am an employer recruiting across multiple institutions, the transcript may stink, but I know that it's going to be two columns or three columns, I know it's going to be organized in time. I know that at the bottom, the last GPA is probably going to be, you know, an average of all courses across all time and so on.

And so we need as a community over time to develop a format for CLRs where there's a visual language that brings a certain consistency to how things are presented that's flexible enough so that what is presented is distinctive to the institution. And that's what we've tried to do in the CLR service is bring a set of charter institutions together, as diverse as Elon University and UMGC, to say, are there some common ways, even though what you're representing is very distinct, are there some common ways that we can represent it so that even as these are distinct records, someone receiving them can make sense of them?

It's also important that they include machine-readable data, and that the machine-readable data be standard spaced. And IMS has a great CLR standard, so we can talk more about this. But we've got to create a space of innovation and experimentation that also has a certain degree of standardization and consistency to get that tension right.

DOUG LEDERMAN: So the other... That's really helpful. But the other element of it is that to the extent that this is meant to be a learner record, you'd like to think that there is... Is the goal for there to be one for a learner such that from, that it's, somebody who has been not just transferring from a two-year to a four-year, but potentially there and back and all around, and taken courses from multiple institutions virtually, etc., which is obviously, broadly the direction that I think we're increasingly moving in, is there a true comprehensive record for a learner independent of institutions? [CROSSTALK] So that's what I mean...

MATTHEW PITTINSKY: Yeah, you'd think with the word comprehensive, I think that's right. I mean, I think when most people think a CLR, they think about it in the light that Insiya described, which is an innovated transcript from an institution's perspective. But that's the importance of machine-readable data and standard space machine readable data is it allows you to open your imagination to third-party services that could allow you to bring them in from multiple places and create a record of records over time. And I do think that's part of the future as well.

And it also brings in a question, the learner also brings in the question of learner agency over what's in

the record. There's not much dispute that what is in a current transcript today and what level of control a student has, which is pretty little. But if I don't want to disclose that I was college Democrat or college Republican. And if I, you know, ultimately decided to change careers and don't want to include competency information for things that are unrelated to what I'm pursuing, an interesting dimension of the CLR is how far we go in empowering the learner over the record.

DOUG LEDERMAN: Insiya, as you are implementing this, starting to implement this at UMGC, I know UMGC presumably has a lots of students who have multiple previous institutions and educational experiences in their backgrounds. I don't know whether the pool of business school learners that you're focusing, MBA learners, that you're focusing on are more or less start to finish at UMGC. But how do you think about that question of sort of, the institutional, the record of a student at an institution versus something broader? And have you run into that yet?

INSIYA BREAM: Yeah, I mean, I think it comes down to the question of technology and like who the issuer is, and how we can make sure that a record like this is validated and 100 percent insured. And for us, as a starting point, we use specifically what the student is doing at the institution. And, you know, I think for our students, that one of the questions that they're going to have is, well, can I add in this accounting certificate that I did here? Can I add in this certification? And I think that that's something we're going to have to open to and consider, because when we're living in this world of learning is everywhere, and you're talking about a record that is trying to show everything that a student knows and can do, and then you don't necessarily know specifically what their angle is or what they're trying to do with it, it definitely starts opening up that conversation of what more can we do and how can we make this more meaningful to the student outside of just what they're doing at your institution.

DOUG LEDERMAN: There's been a good bit of recent questioning by employers of whether graduates are emerging with the knowledge and skills employers say they need and want. And one of the things I wrestle with is how much of that is because on an actual deficit in what students know and can do, versus students' inability to explain or employers' inability to understand what the students have learned. How do you see the influence of those different factors? And to the extent that something like a learner record is about translation, does it have the potential to make a difference?

INSIYA BREAM: In higher education generally, you kind of congratulate the student once they've earned their final credential. And I think what a comprehensive learner record really sort of allows a student to do is focus on their learning along the way. So if they're completed 60 percent of their coursework, you know, there is a ton of learning and skill that they've taken away. And so let's say that they're out for a promotion at work, and, really, those skills that they were looking to gain were accomplished within that

first 60 percent of their program, you know, that enables them to actually move forward with their career goals quicker than when they actually earned that final degree. And so I think that's really a powerful component of being able to kind of show them their learning along the way, not just when they've earned that final credential.

I think in addition to that, giving them, like so for us, when we're talking specifically what is learned in the MBA program, we're giving them specific language right on that document that hey can pull into a resume or into an interview, right? And so it's, and then they don't have to remember, okay, like, when did I learn that? How did I learn that? I mean, it specifically ties, okay, I did this project. This is how I accomplished it, and these were my outcomes. And so it just kind of puts it right in front of them rather than them having to craft their learning and articulating that on their own.

DOUG LEDERMAN: And, Matt, before we come to you, as you were talking, Insiya made me think that it probably has the potential to help institutions be more intentional about what they are ensuring students are exposed to and whether they're gaining it. I don't know, Matt, feel free to please jump in.

MATTHEW PITTINSKY: I mean, Insiya and I are both nodding our heads as aggressively as you can, so I'm giving away that we can see each on Zoom, even though it's an audio podcast, but... Yeah, I can't really expand much on what Insiya said. I think it was spot on.

But I would bring in a different type of institution, which is the liberal arts institution. I'm an unabashed promoter and believer in the value of a liberal arts education. I think the critique of the liberal arts education as deaf to or as unresponsive to the needs of the workforce is completely wrong. In fact, it's contrary to what most or many surveys say. I think we're a better economy, society, certainly we're a better polity the more individuals who graduate with a liberal arts degree.

I taught sociology, sociology of education research methods. When I taught sociology of education, I taught students... I didn't assume many of them would go on to be sociologists, let alone sociologists of education, right? I wanted then certainly to be thoughtful as learners, and as parents, and as participants in the educational system, as voters. But ultimately, I said, your learning objectives are to write well, speak well, think analytically, and be comfortable with numbers, and socio-ed is the context in which I going to help develop those four skills.

So this is a very long-winded way of saying that if you are a believer in the value of a liberal arts education, because of all of these skills that it develops, then you should be at the front of the line in insisting that your institution innovate its records to reflect those skills, to reflect those learning outcomes, because that's the existential threat to liberal arts institutions is a belief that they are not developing what I describe as evergreen skills. I think it's absolutely absurd to take the argument that because the skills demanded by the economy are changing so rapidly that somehow the traditional degree should be hyper-responsive? That seems like a fool's errant to me, as opposed to doubly down on the evergreen skills that are going to drive you over your life course, and then recognize that there is certificates and other kinds of programs that are going to round the out. And again, I'm not speaking for every type of learner and every type of institution. I get that. But that's my reaction to the broad question that you framed.

DOUG LEDERMAN: Insiya, what are the next steps at UMGC in terms of moving the comprehensive learner record concept forward? What are the steps ahead if this is to get engrained in how the university operates rather than be a one-off or a niche thing there?

INSIYA BREAM: But I think if we're to move forward, I think there are some key things we do have to focus on, one of which is just really aligning all of our programs and their outcomes to support CLR or other type of credentialing, I think that's really important. And I think to your point, really getting, you know, our programs, and those who are in the schools to really sort of focus on a different type of creation that's meaningful for a student in this way. I think that's really important.

And you know, just... There's a lot of different angles here, but I think one is just that focus and ultimate goal of allowing a student to articulate their skills is really always going to be our focus as long as we're focusing on what can the student in the classroom. What are the takeaways? But then also connecting and learning from employers too. You know, figuring out, okay, is this something they'd include in their hiring practices? If so, is there is other content that they'd like to see on a document like this? So really connecting both the academic side along with the employment pieces. But also just making sure that the language we use in academia matches the language that's being used out in the marketplace. I think that's really going to be so important when connecting our students to the opportunities that they're seeking.

DOUG LEDERMAN: That was the University of Maryland Global Campus's Insiya Bream and Parchment's Matt Pittinsky. Thanks to them for joining us, and to Wiley Education Services for supporting this episode of The Key. But thanks to all of you for listening. This is the 50th episode of The Key, and we are Inside Higher Ed are deeply grateful that you're choosing to spend your time with us. We'll see you here next week. Until then, stay well and stay safe.