Ensuring Educational Excellence and a Career-Focused Experience through a Skills-Aligned Curriculum Map

By Mary Elizabeth Smith, M.Ed., and Nick Williams, Ed.D.

Introduction

University of Phoenix has always been focused on ensuring that students engage in a career-relevant learning experience. In 2019 we began the next evolution of our career-focused experience by aligning skills to course learning outcomes to help close the gap between academic language and employer language. Higher education uses course outcomes to articulate what learners should be able to do after successful completion of a course, but this language is not common or easy for employers and students to interpret together. Our updated curriculum supports course outcomes with a skills language derived from labor market research and designed for real-world application. We believe this helps learners more effectively share their knowledge, skills, and abilities with employers. This work also provides the foundation for current technology enablement like digital credentials as well as future-state strategies such as a comprehensive learner record.

To achieve this next evolution, we had to be committed to the vision of the final ecosystem and work iteratively and collaboratively across functional units. The highlights of the ecosystem are briefly described below with additional depth following.

1. Skills-Aligned Program Curriculum Map

The skills-aligned map is the foundation for every program's curriculum. Each course outcome is mapped to program learning outcomes and specific industry skills validated using multiple sources of input.

2. Student-Facing Skills-Aligned Learning Experience

The course learning experience is derived from the curriculum map and ensures that students know the skills that are aligned to the course, and the authentic assessments that measure a skill.

3. Outcomes Management Tool as a Single Source of Truth

Skills-aligned learning is managed through a web-based outcomes management tool, which supports creating a common language and single source of truth.

4. Learner Record

Successful skill demonstrations from the classroom are collected digitally. The goal is to capture these alongside other academic achievements earned by a student, such as digital badge or microcredential (achievement of a cluster of digital badges), within a comprehensive learner record.

The following sections describe how a skills-aligned ecosystem provides a vehicle to help students realize the power of their education more quickly and efficiently by validating skill acquisition throughout their educational journey. The foundation of this experience, the digitized skills-aligned curriculum, is evident throughout the career-centric design of courses, measured through authentic assessment, supported with technology, and the source of truth for all university innovation.
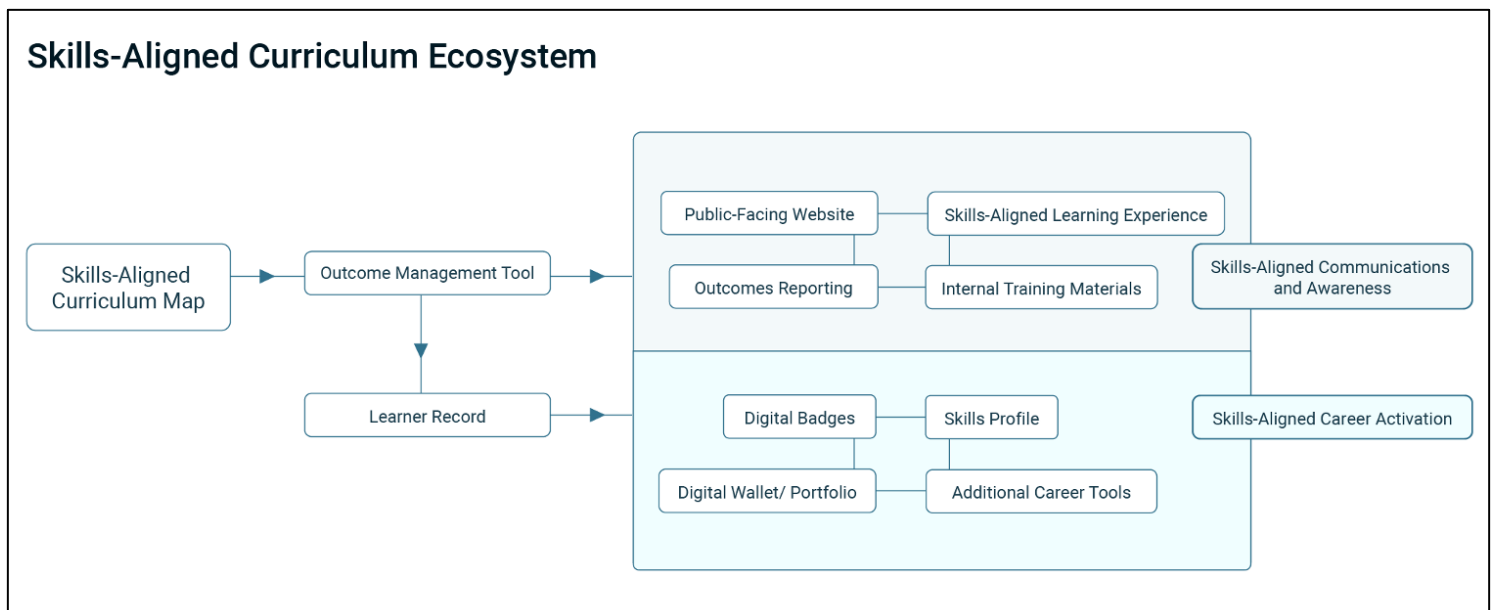

Figure 1 – High-level depiction of an ecosystem based on the foundation of a skills-aligned curriculum map. Once the verified map is locked, it is uploaded into an outcome management tool and becomes the source of truth for all related content and strategies.

Foundation: Skills-Aligned Program Curriculum Map

The University has always leveraged program-level curriculum maps, but as part of the re-envisioning process, a tighter skills-aligned framework, additional mapping guidelines were enacted in 2019. This work required immense commitment on the part of the college leaders and subject matter experts.

Program curriculum maps leverage a variety of inputs including academic leader visioning, aligned job titles, industry advisory council feedback, external standards, subject matter expert feedback, and labor analytics. To support the alignment of relevant skills, and to construct a focused skills-aligned, career-relevant course, university leaders decided that every credit would equal one course student learning outcome (CSLO). So began the 1:1:1 relationship; one course outcome would be mapped to one career-relevant skill and one authentic assessment would be used as the measurement instrument for the outcome and aligned skill.

Once a curriculum map is validated, it is ingested into an outcomes management tool and becomes the source of truth and connector for all other strategies, such as digital badging or populating course information on the phoenix.edu website.

Course ID	Course Title	Course Skill	CSLO
CCMH/515	Legal, Ethical, and Professional Issues in Counseling	Professional Legal Liability	Explain legal responsibilities of the counseling profession.

Figure 2 – Portion of a Curriculum Map. Note the 1:1 relationship between the Course Student Learning Outcome (CSLO) and the Course Skill. The skill can be used to describe, in employer language, what a learner can do. Each outcome and skill are measured using an authentic assessment.

Map Elements

A skills-aligned curriculum map is not complete until key pieces of information are entered and then validated. Program Deans and Associate Deans work closely with Accreditation, if applicable, and Assessment during the map's design phase.

While there are many alignments within the skills-aligned curriculum map, the framework requires that every course outcome, which is a clear, concise, and measurable statement of knowledge, skill, ability, or disposition that learners will demonstrate in a course, is aligned to a skill. From our perspective, the course skill is the language that learners would use with employers. A course skill is a career-relevant

skill that is developed within a course and is unique to a program. An authentic assessment provides the measurement of the course outcome and aligned skill.

Translating the Map into a Skill-Aligned Learning Experience

The skills-aligned curriculum map provides the roadmap for a consistent career-centric course design. Our course development tactics strive to illuminate the course skills and outcomes, and using a contextualized career narrative approach, we can develop strong connections between the associated skill and the aligned real-world deliverables (summative assessments). Learners continually encounter the skill and outcome throughout the course, including within the syllabus, module titles, discussions, discussion titles, and contextualized career narratives.

Figure 3 – Discussion Question Example. Our career-centric design tactics weave in relevant job titles and skill language within course components, and ensure content is situated within a realistic career context.

While the design tactics signal to learners the relationship between skills, outcomes, and the career, our authentic assessment strategy ensures that learners are engaging in real-world application. For example, learners don't write a paper about how they would complete a task, instead to demonstrate their mastery of a course outcome and the aligned skill, they create the same artifact that they would be expected to within the career. The skills-aligned curriculum map, specifically the Skill Descriptor, provides the necessary vision for the summative assessment. Learners are guided through their summative assessment using an analytical rubric that specifies performance criteria and level.

Summative Assessment: Suicide Risk Assessment & Safety Plan

Most **counselors** will encounter a client expressing suicidal ideations at some point in their career and need to perform a **crisis assessment**. A counselor's ability to recognize and address suicidality can be a life-saving skill. When the risk of suicide is identified, counselors should work to develop a therapeutic relationship with the client and their family as appropriate and work to develop safety plans in collaboration with the client. The safety plan indicates the actions that clients can take to respond and monitor their suicidal urges by outlining their coping and problem-solving skills and abilities.

Assessment Deliverable

Download the Client Safety Plan form to use for this assignment. After reviewing the form, watch the "Suicide Risk Intake Assessment," which portrays the initial crisis intervention where the counselor conducts a suicide risk assessment of a client.

Note: A transcript of the video is available.

Use the relevant information given in the video to **complete** a suicide risk assessment for the example client using Part 1 of the Patient Safety Plan form. In this form, be sure to **document** the rationale for the risk level, ways to reduce the current risk, and if relevant, a proposed plan for follow-up.

Develop an ongoing safety plan for this client to follow once the initial intervention is complete. **Use** Part 2 of the form to document the parts of your plan using clear language that the client can understand if in crisis.

Figure 4 – Summative Assessment Example. This assessment aligns to an authentic assessment strategy to ensure the learner is developing a real-world deliverable. Course design tactics include highlighting the deliverable in the assessment title, providing career context at the beginning of the assessment, including the aligned skill.

The skills-aligned curriculum map ensures that our courses are career-relevant, and learners can leverage what they are learning and producing to either build a portfolio of relevant examples or apply to

their current careers.

Powering Career-Focused Strategy with Technology

Validated skills-aligned program curriculum maps are uploaded to a web-based outcomes management tool. All units of learning within our skills-aligned courses and programs are organized there with associations to the aligned skills, external standards, and other levels of learning outcomes. Centralizing and digitizing these maps establishes a single source of truth for this information at the university. Sharing taxonomies of skills and learning outcomes – and the relationships among them – develops a shared awareness and common language for university stakeholder groups who facilitate student learning. The elements of the skills-aligned curriculum are communicated through a variety of channels.

Leveraging the Digitized Maps for Communication and Awareness of Skills

Skill language is leveraged in the courses' **curriculum design,** within course guides and other materials showing learners where they learn/demonstrate these skills. Elements of the curriculum map are also implemented in **internal training materials** and resources so student-facing teams of advisors, faculty, and staff can speak the same language around the career relevancy of our teaching and learning. The associations among units of learning in our skills-aligned curriculum are highlighted throughout internal and external **outcomes reporting**, reinforcing that we teach what matters for our learners' personal and professional goals.

One additional and notable integration of the skills-aligned curriculum relates to **the university's public-facing website,** www.phoenix.edu. By configuring an interface with the outcomes management tool, we can display updated CSLOs and skills on the page for every skills-aligned program and course. This allows prospective learners and all other visitors to the site the ability explore a desired course of study and connect the career-relevant skills they can expect to demonstrate throughout their learning experience.

Figure 5 – Website Example. Using an API integration, our public-facing website references the cloud-based outcomes management tool to display the course-level skills and learning outcomes for all courses in a program's preferred course sequence.

Leveraging the Digitized Maps for Learner Career Activation with Skills

Leveraging the 1:1:1 relationship described earlier and referencing the outcomes management tool we can translate learner achievement in the classroom to skills. If a score earned on a summative assessment surpasses a set 'threshold', the learner successfully demonstrates the aligned course-level skill. This is engineered by an automated program that collects and publishes each skill attained to a learner record that amasses all academic achievements – passed courses, demonstrated skills, as well as digital microcredentials – for each learner. This dynamic skills record facilitates greater understanding for learners as to how their learning can be used and enables specific career/skills-based tools to be at their disposal.

Career-activation tools are available to all university learners. These tools help learners assess and match their career interest to programs of study, as well as identify skills and abilities they already possess from prior experience. Each learner can continually reference a personalized **Skills Profile** that amasses all self-identified skills along with those demonstrated through classroom achievements, along

with the context in which those skills are applied. Additional features show learners available jobs and career paths that match the mix of skills and abilities they possess.

Of note are the **Digital Badges** we offer to learners in select courses and programs where the curriculum emphasizes a specific cluster of skills that resonate within a job market. College faculty and staff work with industry partners to highlight career-relevant opportunities for these skills and build authentic assessments to demonstrate their application. The resulting microcredentials are built on the same learner record achievements described above. They provide a widely accepted means by which the learner can display, and share verified and evidence-based skills.
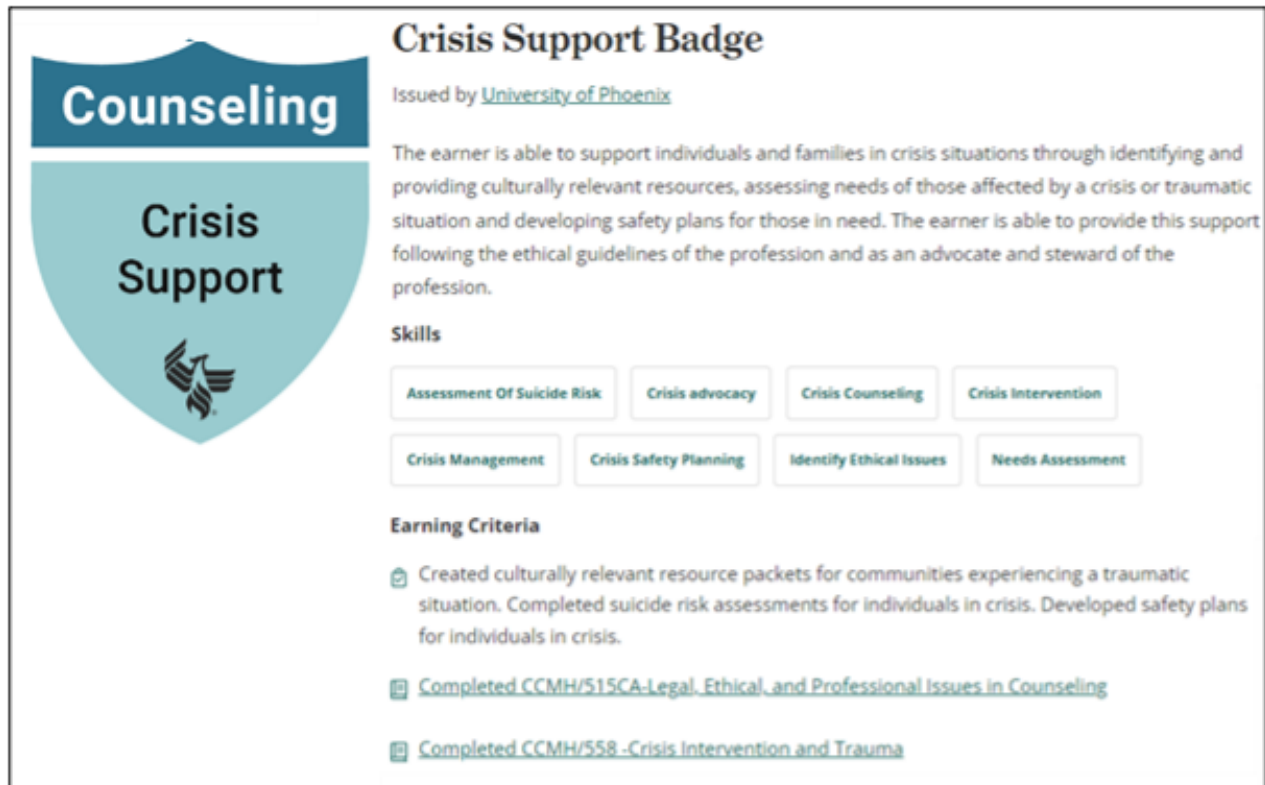

Figure 6 – Digital Badge example. Through our external badging partner, learners can view the details of digital badges they earn. These microcredentials consist of a set of achievements and skills with verifiable evidence of its completion by the learner in the classroom.

Future Focused Iteration

To help learners further activate and accelerate their careers, we are constantly iterating on the tools and resources we offer. Among these ideas, we are working to further illuminate a skills path across projected course of study for learners, so they have greater clarity around skills they can demonstrate in their next courses and explore options to customize their learning accordingly. We are also developing **Digital Wallet/Portfolio** products to make the learner's skills-aligned achievements more accessible and useful externally. Across these varied efforts, we reinforce our mission to help learners connect and apply career-relevant learning from the University of Phoenix.

About the Authors

Mary Elizabeth Smith has been involved in educational innovation for over thirty years. Currently the Director of Learning Innovation Strategy in the Center for Teaching and Learning at the University of Phoenix, she previously served as the Research and Implementation Strategist and the Director of Curriculum Development. Smith began her career working with K-12 pre-service teachers to integrate technology into lesson plans and produce hyper-card stacks. Her affinity for educational technology places her in the category of an 'early adopter' and she was one of the first faculty at a previous institution to convert an on-campus Computer Science course for online delivery in 1999. Smith's career in education includes working in curriculum development, learning design, faculty development, faculty, and e-learning roles for four universities and several community colleges as well as two educational software companies. Smith holds a bachelor's in Speech Communication and Journalism from Southern Illinois University and an M.Ed. in Educational Media and Computers from Arizona State University.

Nick Williams is a Director of Assessment at University of Phoenix. In his role, Nick coordinates student learning outcomes assessment efforts across multiple platforms, including direct measures of student performance within and outside the classroom, student survey systems, and digital badging projects. Before moving to higher ed, Nick was a K-12 teacher for several years. His advanced degrees include an Ed.D. in leadership and innovation from Arizona State University, a M.Ed. in educational measurement from University of Illinois-Chicago, and a M.Ed. in curriculum/instruction from University of Notre Dame. His research interests include effects of norming faculty raters for student learning outcomes assessment efforts, culture of assessment, and UX of students and faculty for field experience/assessment programs.