

Valencia College: LifeMap and Atlas— Planning for Success

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Background

VALENCIA COLLEGE is a multicampus, urban community college in Orlando, Florida, that served over 70,000 students in 2010–11; 51 percent of these were underrepresented minorities, and 41 percent received Pell Grants. In the mid-1990s, we focused our strategic planning to become a more learning-centered college¹ with a focus on student success (progression and completion) and learning outcomes, which led to deep changes in systems, strategy, and engagement. During the past fifteen years, we have seen dramatic increases in the rates of student progression and completion, for which Valencia was recently recognized by the Aspen Institute as the No. 1 community college in the United States.

Description

LifeMap and Atlas are two of the projects to which we attribute this success. LifeMap is Valencia's developmental advising system that promotes student social and academic integration and education and career planning, as well as acquisition of study and life skills. It creates a normative expectation for students that they have a career and educational plan early in their enrollment at Valencia and integrates a system of tools, services, programs, and people (faculty and staff) to engage with students to document, revise, and develop those plans. LifeMap's five developmental stages, based on the ideal student progression, are as follows:

1. College Transition
2. Introduction to College

3. Progression to Degree
4. Graduation Transition
5. Lifelong Learning

(Detailed information about the LifeMap stages can be found at <http://valenciacollege.edu/lifemap>.) LifeMap is constantly evolving through an analysis of programs and services that align with each of LifeMap's stages, deep investment in staff and faculty development that integrates LifeMap into the college curriculum and co-curriculum, and an internal marketing campaign using engaging images and messages to connect and direct students to LifeMap resources.

Atlas is Valencia's learning portal; it is a major component of how we engage with students in LifeMap. It was designed on the principles of "connection and direction," which reflected our belief that technology could mediate our engagement with students over time and place, as well as help us reach our goal of empowering students to become increasingly self-directed in their educational journey to, through, and beyond Valencia. Atlas is built using SunGard Higher Education's Luminis portal and Banner ERP Systems. It integrates numerous applications into a single sign-on web portal that provides information and tools for students to

- explore career and educational options,
- develop concrete educational plans to graduation,
- manage course schedules and financial aid, and
- document their own learning.

Other important features include

- direct e-mail to students, faculty, and staff;
- a homepage for every course at Valencia, including an e-mail list for the classes of all faculty;
- an online syllabus and outline;
- a chat room and message board; and
- Atlas groups that anyone in the system can create and join, creating the option for limitless learning communities.

Atlas also provides students with "in the cloud" storage for files as well as free access to Microsoft Office applications from any web browser. Information sites, such as those focusing on advising, admissions, financial aid, and academic program information from Valencia's public websites, are also integrated within Atlas so that students do not leave the portal as they explore various

sources of information. We have developed intentional and sequenced communication plans for various cohorts of Valencia students that prompt their “just in time” actions to keep their educational plans on track from initial enrollment through to graduation. Because Atlas requires secure sign-on, we are also able to provide online advising services through the portal.

Most college portals include the standard tools for conducting enrollment functions such as registration, progress reports, degree audits, payment records, and catalog information. To these, Atlas adds a “My LifeMap” tab that includes six important planning tools:

1. My Career Planner
2. My Educational Plan
3. My Financial Plan
4. My Job Prospects
5. My Portfolio
6. MeInTheMaking website

All of these tools started as homegrown applications developed to support LifeMap in its early years of development. Over the past several years, we have sought and found appropriate third-party applications and have now transitioned three of our LifeMap tools from our homegrown custom application to these tools while still retaining the “front face” of each Valencia LifeMap tool. MeInTheMaking (<http://meinthemaking.com/>) is a website that was created to support the 2010 refresh of the LifeMap marketing campaign. It provides a search function for all of Atlas and the .edu sites that link within Atlas, the stories of six peer role models and how they use LifeMap and Atlas, and categorized informational links for students to important online resources.

Valencia’s IT staff also created LifeMap reporting tools that we refer to as LifeMap Analytics. For each of the LifeMap tools, we review monthly reports on usage that include detailed information on number of users, hits, and page views reported daily and in summary for the month. For the My Educational Plan (MEP) and My Portfolio we are also able to create reports that allow entry of any designated time frame and report on the number of new plans or portfolios created and on the total number of existing plans or portfolios. And, for the MEP, we can also create reports on the number of users, the average number of plans per user (students can create and save up to three plans), the highest number of plans created by program, and a list of the number of plans created for each program during the designated time period.

Additional LifeMap Analytics tools generate three reports that provide student-level information to college academic and student-services leaders on the

MEP and its correlation to other measures of student program intention and progress. The MEP Program Match report is data driven and compares the match between the MEP educational program that students have created in Atlas and their program in Banner (from their Valencia application or program-update submission to the college). The Planned vs. Enrolled Courses report is term driven and provides the percentage of courses in which students are enrolled that are included in their MEP. The MEP Graduates report is term driven and provides the percentage of graduates with an MEP and the percentage of graduates whose primary MEP is in the program in which they are graduating.

Evidence of Effectiveness

The LifeMap Analytics tools are used in a number of ways to better understand student behavior around career and educational planning, progression, and completion in order to better design student engagement with faculty and staff so that students can achieve their goals. Improvements are based on regular reviews and conversations with the faculty and staff who work with LifeMap tools. Each year the vice president of Student Affairs convenes the LifeMap Tools Group to discuss updates needed to continually improve the tools and student support. LifeMap Analytics tools are also reviewed at least annually to track the progression of their use and alignment of student intent with student behavior. Over time, we have seen increased alignment of student intent and behavior. For example, the match between student MEP and actual course taking was 43 percent in spring 2006 and increased to 60 percent in spring 2011. The LifeMap Analytics tools also provide student-level information so that we can follow up with individual students whose intent and behavior appear to be out of alignment. This work is the subject for further study, deeper understanding, and increased student engagement.

In summary, Atlas provides the technology that goes hand in glove with the intent and mission of LifeMap and complements the person-to-person interactions we have with students on our Valencia campuses. Atlas was designed to enhance, not replace, person-to-person interaction. LifeMap and Atlas are ever-evolving concepts and applications that continue to go deeper into alignment with students' purpose and goal achievement.

Note

1. R. B. Barr and J. Tagg, "A New Paradigm for Undergraduate Education," *Change* 27, no. 6 (1995): 12–25; T. O'Banion, *Learning College for the 21st Century* (Washington, DC: Oryx Press, 1994).

Joyce C. Romano is Vice President for Student Affairs at Valencia College. Her work at Valencia has focused on the design and implementation of LifeMap, our developmental advising model and system; Atlas, our learning community portal; and an integrated student services model through which students learn the educational processes for their success. **Bill White** has served as the Chief Information Officer at Valencia College since 1998. In this role, White provides strategic and operational leadership for Valencia's information technology services and initiatives. Prior to joining Valencia College, he served for eleven years as the Director of the Computer Center at Rockford College in Rockford, Illinois.
