



# Closing the Gap Between Students' Career Readiness and Employers' Expectations: An Innovative Competency-Based Approach

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## ABSTRACT

This article describes one aspect of Florida International University's (FIU) response to the changing landscape of higher education and the ever-evolving world of work. The following case study highlights how strategic planning grounded in comprehensive planning and evaluation processes led to the development of an innovative and agile quality enhancement plan that aims to enhance students' preparation for the 21st-century workforce by certifying students' attainment of critical competencies related to artificial intelligence, data interpretation, and emotional intelligence. Utilizing a faculty-driven approach, FIU was successful in leveraging a required institutional effectiveness accreditation process to develop and implement a university-wide strategic initiative that focuses on student learning outcomes that close the gap between students' career readiness and employers' expectations.

## KEYWORDS

Career Readiness, Competency-based Learning, Digital Badge, Micro-credential, Skill Validation, Workforce Readiness

## INTRODUCTION

The growth of the digital economy has impacted the work environment, presenting numerous challenges to higher education. Alternative education providers, the spread of digital communities, social media, do-it-yourself learning, and the global coronavirus pandemic have reshaped many aspects of modern life, including the traditional model of higher education. Artificial intelligence, machine

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learning, robotics, and advanced technology are poised to permanently alter the nature of work. New graduates will enter a workforce where machines process data, perform technological functions, and compute scientific calculations more efficiently and accurately than humans.

Cognizant of the impact of the digital economy on the work environment, higher education institutional systems must employ flexibility, diversity, and agility to meet learners' needs. Institutions of higher education are obligated to engage in ongoing, comprehensive, integrated, and institution-wide research-based planning and evaluation processes that focus on (1) educational quality and effectiveness; (2) learner needs to ensure employment readiness, post-graduation success, and workforce and industry advancement; and (3) a systematic review of institutional goals and outcomes consistent with its mission.

This article describes a case study illustrating one aspect of Florida International University's response to the changing landscape of higher education and the ever-evolving world of work. The case study highlights how strategic planning grounded in comprehensive planning and evaluation processes led to the development of an innovative and agile quality enhancement plan that stimulates and facilitates learning and includes the certification of critical competencies such as analytic, interpersonal, global, and professional skills as well as technological and data literacies. Born from the strategic planning process and following expectations of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) institutional accreditation requirements, the quality enhancement plan, entitled *Critical Skills for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, focuses on amplifying learner success and aligning curriculum with the knowledge, skills, abilities, and values required for success in the workplace.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Strategic Planning in Higher Education

Strategic planning in higher education emerged in the 1970s and 1980s in response to fluctuating enrollment, changing student demographics, and funding inconsistencies (Hinton, 2012). According to Hinton (2012), the data-driven strategic planning process arose as a proactive solution for maneuvering in a rapidly changing environment with declining resources. Initially, strategic planning in higher education was used to articulate the institutional mission and vision, prioritize resource allocation, and promote organizational focus. As institutions of higher education began to engage in strategic planning, federal and state governments, along with accrediting agencies, developed standards for assessment and learning outcomes measures in response to external demands for accountability. Institutions of higher education were required to have a strategic plan and an assessment plan to satisfy accreditation requirements by the 1990s (Hinton, 2012). During this same time, federal and state governments began tying funding and regulatory oversight to accountability measures, making the planning process more data-driven.

### Accreditation Requirements

The SACSCOC, an institutional accreditor recognized by the United States Department of Education, has core requirements related to strategic planning (Section 7: Institutional Planning and Effectiveness) and assessment of learning outcomes (Section 8: Student Achievement) (Commission on Colleges, 2017). The SACSCOC requires institutions of higher education to demonstrate a commitment to continuous improvement based on a systematic, research-based process that continuously examines institutional performance and student achievement. This process is expected to inform decision-making at all levels, such as budgetary decisions and decisions impacting students' educational experiences and learning outcomes (Commission on Colleges, 2017). The SACSCOC established the Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) as a requirement of the reaffirmation of accreditation review process. An institution must identify a QEP topic through its ongoing, comprehensive planning and evaluation

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