



Columbia College Chicago

Hitting the Ground Running with Columbia College Chicago Online

How Destiny One is helping a new online division prepare for the future it expects



How Destiny One Helped Columbia Online Launch and Prepare for Growth

In 2017, Columbia College Chicago launched a new online division with significant aspirations for growth. Not wanting to partner with a traditional Online Program Management (OPM) vendor to build and scale their online operation, they developed an infrastructure for their fledgling online division that would allow them to exceed their students' expectations.

To accomplish this, they partnered with Destiny Solutions and implemented the Destiny One Customer Lifecycle Management System, which gave them the resources to bring non-traditional students to the door, deliver the experience they expect, and offer the courses they need.

Columbia College Chicago, located in Chicago's South Loop district, has always been a popular destination for 18- to 22-year-old learners looking for a traditional postsecondary experience. However, as the demographic of learners trying to access postsecondary programs evolved—becoming older, focusing more on specific career outcomes, and behaving more like customers—leadership at the university recognized that they needed to allow online operations to change along with it.

"Columbia was somewhat behind in addressing the lifelong learning market in Chicago," said Stanley Wearden, Provost of Columbia College Chicago. "Even in a city like Chicago where you expect people to want to come and take courses on campus, prospective students were choosing to enroll with competitors who were offering courses online."

"That signalled a broader industry shift in terms of student preferences in continuing education, and we seriously lacked an understanding of just how much continuing education had moved into the online sphere," he continued. "There's a lot we can offer connected to our expertise in design and digital media, which are high-demand fields among both non-traditional learners and industry professionals."

The university made competing in the professional education and lifelong learning space part of its central strategy, the hallmark of which was launching Columbia College Chicago Online (Columbia Online). The new division, which launched in late 2017, focuses on providing high-quality educational

experiences that help students launch or grow careers in high-demand industries.

For many universities new to the online environment, Online Program Management (OPM) companies stand out as a quick and easy way to get into the market. Columbia Online's leaders decided to go a different route, choosing instead to build a best-of-breed infrastructure designed to grow with them. To harness that effort they implemented Destiny One, the Customer Lifecycle Management (CLM) software platform designed by Destiny Solutions. Crafted specifically for non-traditional education, Destiny One provides staff with the tools they need to efficiently manage all aspects of the learner lifecycle, supporting marketing, enrollment, curriculum, finance, and more. The Destiny One CLM integrates with other key campus systems, engages students with an Amazon-like experience, optimizes staff efficiency, and provides business intelligence that empowers data-driven decision making.

For Columbia Online, this meant:

- Being able to deliver the student experience today's adult learner expects
- Supporting that experience with a modern and automated infrastructure
- Having the tools to develop and deliver programming that directly responds to shifts in the labor market

Bringing Students in the Door

Adult and other non-traditional learners are more discerning shoppers than 18- to 22-year-olds coming straight out of high school. They expect to be able to easily find relevant offerings, and they expect a seamless experience that takes them from finding a course or program to registering without barriers. If those base expectations aren't met, they go elsewhere—often without ever having contacted the institution.

Meeting their needs requires colleges and universities to become more student-centric. Institutional leaders must ensure everything from academic offerings to the online experience matches up with what their learners have come to expect.

“Students find a lot of value in being able to cherry pick the courses that they need to advance their careers, start a business, or fulfill a passion,” said Robert Green, Vice Provost for Digital Learning at Columbia College Chicago. “People who are busy in their day-to-day lives need to be able to access our programming, and our online format allows them to do so.”

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Helping students find the exact courses they want requires Columbia Online to market their courses effectively, and Destiny One plays a significant role in supporting that effort. The CLM allows staff to input and update all relevant information about a course (including rich media, fee information, prerequisite requirements, search engine optimization keywords, and much more) in a single spot on a single screen. Since the system is connected into Columbia Online's website, course calendar, LMS and more, staff are assured that the right information is displaying at the right time to the right audiences.

This means students can easily find exactly the courses and programs they're looking for as soon as they're launched.

“An online student is someone who's shopping around for the best educational options,” said Green. “Once they see something that they feel will fulfill their career needs or individual goals, they want to enroll right away.”

Destiny One makes registering for a course as easy for prospective students as it is for them to buy a book online. They can add their desired courses to their online shopping cart, progress through a registration process that aligns with eCommerce best practices, and securely pay online with a credit card (even applying any relevant discount codes they may have at checkout).

With Destiny One in their toolkit, Columbia Online is able to offer students an enrollment experience that mirrors the online experiences delivered by companies like Amazon and Grubhub.

By simplifying the online registration experience, Columbia Online makes it easy for students to progress through the enrollment process and shows—rather than tells—learners they value their time and experience.

Delivering the Experience Students Expect

Of course, once a student has enrolled it is critical to deliver the great customer and educational experience they registered for.

“As soon as the student enrolls, we need to be ready,” said Green. “The student wants to feel welcomed into the online community, and not experience any glitches that make them second-guess their educational investment.”

As soon as a student is enrolled, Destiny One appropriately and immediately provisions them to ensure they

Why Not Partner With an OPM?



For many fledgling online divisions, partnering with an OPM can seem like a straightforward proposition. After all, the OPM handles all the administration of launching and managing the online programs—in some cases even providing curriculum and instructors—taking much of the stress out of growing in the online environment.

At Columbia Online, though, the OPM route did not suit their ambitions or expectations.

“What it came down to was not wanting to lock ourselves into a long-term agreement where a significant portion of our revenue was going to a single vendor,” said Green. “We wanted to own our destiny and have the flexibility to make changes as we see fit, and the best-of-breed approach was the right way to accomplish those goals as we grow.”

Most OPMs operate on a revenue-sharing model. According to some estimates, institutions that partner with OPMs wind up paying between 50-60 percent of their tuition revenues from online programming to their vendor.

“It was clear that going with an OPM would be a costlier undertaking with lower margins,” said Wearden.

Additionally, at times in such a partnership, the OPM is entirely responsible for the experience the student receives both inside and outside the digital classroom.

“Many of the OPMs we talked to had an old-school view on the capabilities of an online environment. They were very focused on starting degree programs geared towards traditional learners,” said Wearden. “We had a different vision of where we wanted to go. We wanted to build a catalog of standalone courses and then package those courses into certificates based on demand. The OPMs didn’t understand that mindset.”

“One of the things that was important to me was making sure that we really owned our curriculum,” said Green. “Columbia is a well respected arts institution, and we want to reflect our expertise in what we create. If we’d outsourced that, we may not have had the valuable input that our faculty and qualified instructional designers provided, which enabled us to develop that best-in-class standard.”

have access to the LMS, Student Portal and everything else they need.

“Institutions need to set up the right communication tools to onboard new students, manage a student’s academic scheduling and progress towards a certificate or diploma, make sure that the student understands what it means to be a student at Columbia Online, and provide them with ways to connect,” said Green. “Destiny One works with our CRM and LMS to make sure that we are providing that overall engaging experience to the student.”

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Through the innovative Student Portal, learners can take control of their experience. They can enroll in courses, request transcripts, review their historical financial information, and much more, all through their personal portal. They can also drop courses, define their communication preferences, and track their progress toward certificates. All of this ensures they are getting the experience they want out of the institution without having to navigate through bureaucratic red tape to accomplish tasks that the average consumer thinks are simple. By the same token, it takes the pressure off staff, allowing them to focus their time on high-value student interactions and queries.

Ultimately, that focus on keeping students engaged will pay dividends for Columbia Online. The division is geared towards offering just-in-time programming that working professionals need to advance in their careers, and the need for ongoing education is only going to grow as time goes on.

By delivering to students a seamless and supportive experience that they can control, Columbia Online is forging and maintaining relationships with learners that will last over the course of their educational careers.

Offering the Relevant Programming Students Need

The modern student needs to be assured that offerings will be able to meaningfully contribute to their professional and personal growth. This programmatic relevance plays as crucial a part in delivering the experience today’s students expect as a simplified registration process.

“We felt we would be able to address market demands more quickly and effectively by putting together courses that an individual can take and use immediately without having to invest in a full degree program,” Wearden said.

“Our courses need to be immediately applicable,” Green added. “The courses and programs that we’re building are meant to provide students with tangible skills that they can use with their employers or within their own entrepreneurial venture from the get-go.”

Creating an environment where courses are constantly evolving to maintain relevance and responsiveness to labor market needs requires a system that allows institutions to evolve as quickly as industry. After all, industry changes don’t conveniently occur within the structures of a semester system.

“We can’t take a year or two to approve a new certificate, or take a semester to

approve a new course,” Wearden said. “We need to be able to move quickly.”

Destiny One allows Columbia Online to ensure its programming is truly responsive to students’ needs by allowing the division to operate on a free calendar. Courses can be launched at any time within the system, and students can register within the timeframes defined by Columbia Online’s staff—not by the agrarian calendar.

By freeing themselves from the semester system, Columbia Online can offer the courses and programs students need whenever they need them.

“Online is a fast-moving world, and Columbia College Chicago Online will be setting the pace.” Wearden said.

Designed for Scale: Growth is on the Horizon for Columbia Online

Launching a new online division is a significant challenge, but a clear mandate and a prioritization of the student experience are central to ensuring success over both the short and long term.

“From the outset, we have been committed to moving as quickly as possible to get Columbia College Chicago Online off the ground, and that has required treating it like a start-up,” said Green. “We’ve rolled up our sleeves, staffed a team of industry leaders, and brought in vendors, including Destiny Solutions, that can help us realize our goals.”

In the short time Columbia Online has been live, the quality programming on offer has already started to generate buzz.

“The quality of what we’re doing with Columbia College Chicago Online is already elevating the reputation of the entire institution—not just the online component, but the bricks-and-mortar as well,” Wearden said. “We have a lot to offer to non-traditional students and Online is a way we can build those connections.”

With Destiny One as its buttress, Columbia Online has the capacity to serve that adult demographic and deliver them the critical offerings they need to succeed in their careers.

“Destiny One’s platform allows for a lot of the functionality we were looking for, while focusing on the lifelong learner market. It allows for easy enrollments, a simple-to-use catalog, and the ability to create certificates, while providing a great student experience,” said Green. “Now we have a lot of the infrastructure in place that we need to be successful.”

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About Destiny One

Destiny One is customer lifecycle management software for higher education administrators serving non-traditional students. It integrates with main-campus systems, engages students with an Amazon- like experience, optimizes staff efficiency, and provides business intelligence empowering data-driven decisions. Destiny One lets schools unite, understand and control all aspects of their business at once.

Destiny One manages the entire learner lifecycle.

Curriculum

Plan and manage courses, certificates and programs

Enrollment

Increase registrations by engaging learners and automating the enrollment process

Marketing

Target marketing campaigns and define consistent branding

Reporting

Leverage dashboards and reports to make business-intelligent decisions

Finance

Govern accounting transactions and manage financial information

System Administration

Configure workflows, staff roles and permissions, and business rules and fees

Want to learn more?

Contact us at
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