

DIGITAL FELLOWS PROJECT

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

The ACAO Digital Fellows Project

Overview

In January 2017, the Association of Chief Academic Officers (ACAO) launched the 18 month [ACAO Digital Fellows Project](#). This fellowship program, supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, is designed to provide senior campus leaders (i.e., Chief Academic Officers or CAOs) the critical information, resources, and support they require to help their faculty understand and adopt high quality digital courseware that personalizes learning and leads to significant gains in undergraduate engagement, retention, and graduation.

Specifically, the project will provide a unique professional opportunity for 30 provosts/CAOs (“ACAO Digital Fellows”) that focuses on the adoption and deployment of courseware and digital learning resources intended to enhance student learning, increase retention and degree completion, and improve institutional outcomes.

The major project activities include:

- Creating a professional development program on digital learning for provosts and CAOs;
- Curating an online archive of resource materials to support this and related digital pedagogy initiatives for ACAO and other organizations collaborating with ACAO;
- A national survey of provosts/CAOs, scheduled to launch in spring 2017;
- Four major convenings/retreats for the project fellows;
- Periodic webinars featuring experts on digital pedagogy;
- Dissemination activities (including reports, conference presentations, campus case studies, webinars, and web resources), which will extend the reach and impact of the ACAO Digital Fellows Program.

ACAO believes that the Digital Fellows Project – and the 30 provosts/CAOs selected for this fellowship opportunity – will be catalysts for a richer, broader, and better-informed institutional and national conversations among provosts, other academic leaders, and faculty about the role and the benefits of digital learning.

Who is eligible to apply for this fellowship opportunity?

The fellowship opportunity is intended for chief academic officers – in essence, the senior academic officer of the college or university. At some campuses this individual will hold the title of provost, vice president or vice chancellor for academic affairs, or chief academic officer. Yet not all institutions use these titles. For example, at many community colleges the senior or ranking academic officer might hold the title of vice president of instruction.

But regardless of title, the clear and simple standard for eligibility is that prospective fellowship applicants must be the senior or ranking academic officer at their college or university. If you report up to someone other than the president, chancellor, or CEO, then in all likelihood you would not be eligible for this fellowship program.

What about institutional affiliation? Is the fellowship program intended for (or targeting) CAOs from specific types of colleges or universities?

There are no restrictions regarding institutional affiliation. The fellowship opportunity is open to CAOs from any accredited, degree-granting public, private non-profit, or private for-profit two- or four-year US college or university.

The [postsecondary mission](#) of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation is to “work with partners to transform higher education models for colleges and universities so that more students – especially low-income and first-generation students – graduate at higher rates, with high-quality degrees or certificates at an affordable price.” Consequently, the Gates Foundation and ACAO hope that this fellowship opportunity will attract candidates from two- and four-year institutions that serve significant numbers of the “new majority in higher education” – first generation, low income, and students of color.

Is this a “professional development” program that will teach me to write code or design courseware?

The quick (and light) answer is that the ACAO fellowship program is not intended to help you learn to code, design software for a course, or create the “killer” mobile app for your campus or for your course.

The serious (and significant) response is that ACAO fellowship is intentionally different from more conventionally structured (yet also high quality) professional development programs or fellowship opportunities common to American higher education.

Most fellowships or professional development opportunities are intended primarily to enhance the portfolio of the individual recipient. For example, many academic fellowship programs provide an opportunity to travel, lecture, or do research. And traditional professional development programs typically are designed to introduce, enhance, or expand a specific set of skills and competencies. In both instances, these experiences enhance the *personal portfolio* of the individual fellow or program participant. The recipient is the primary beneficiary.

In contrast, the ACAO Digital Fellowship is designed to benefit both the individual recipient as well as the larger community of chief academic officers and other senior campus officials interested in and concerned about exploiting the benefits of effective courseware and digital learning resources to enhance instruction, increase retention and graduation rates, and improve institutional outcomes.

What’s the project calendar?

This is an 18 month project, which launched in January 2017. The first months will be spent promoting the project and encouraging CAOs to apply for the fellowship. We plan to announce the fellowship recipients in May, ahead of the first of four convenings or retreats in July. Additional convenings are planned for late October 2017, and also February and June 2018. The project ends in June 2018.

However, the end of the project in June 2018 is not the end of the actual fellowship activities. ACAO expects the 30 Fellows to be involved in dissemination efforts focused on peer institutions and also academic and professional associations.

What’s the expected individual time commitment?

In addition to the four, three-day convenings, the project will schedule periodic webinars to connect the fellows with leaders in the area of digital learning. And over the course of the project Fellows will be expected to work on a digital learning plan for their own institutions.

Is there an individual or institutional financial commitment or obligation?

There is no individual or institutional cost to participate in the ACAO Digital Fellows Program. Courtesy of the grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, ACAO will cover all the direct costs for the fellowship recipients.

Will I receive a stipend if I am selected to be an ACAO Digital Fellow?

No, the ACAO Digital Fellows Project will not provide individual stipends. However, as noted above, the Fellows program will cover all costs for the four convenings or retreats (travel, hotel, etc.).

Additionally, the ACAO grant provides some money to help with efforts to integrate digital course resources into one or more courses at each campus. Fellows will be expected to work with one or more faculty members on their campuses on course redesign to deploy and leverage digital learning resources. The individual campus grants, about \$4000, are specifically intended to underwrite release time for a faculty member to work with the CAO on course redesign and also the larger campus plan for digital pedagogy.

Are there other resources or support services that ACAO will provide as part of this fellowship?

A key component of this project is the identification and curation of resources – reports, strategy documents, campus case studies, and courseware applications. As part of the effort to identify resources for the broader CAO community, ACAO will review, curate, and post materials to its web site for the use of Fellows and others interested and concerned about courseware and digital learning.

My institution is particularly interested in online education. If this fellowship appropriate for me if I want to learn more about online education – course design, institutional strategy, and related issues?

No, the focus of this fellowship program is not online education.

Please provide more information about the four convenings.

The project has four convenings (or retreats) that will bring together all the ACAO fellows, plus experts in the areas of digital courseware, digital learning, leadership and innovation, and other related topics. Please note that fellowship recipients are expected to attend all four retreats.

Listed below are the planned venues and dates for the four convenings:

1. *Scottsdale (Phoenix), Arizona: July 16-19, 2017.* The purpose of this first convening is to increase the Fellows' current understanding of the potential of digital courseware and to present research that demonstrates its effectiveness in improving learning for students. We are going to Scottsdale for this first retreat to learn more about the work on digital learning underway at [EdPlus](#), the innovation incubator at Arizona State University.
2. *Philadelphia: Oct 30 – Nov 2, 2017.* The second convening has been scheduled in conjunction with the 2017 EDUCAUSE conference. We are planning two days of meetings ahead of the EDUCAUSE conference. ACAO will make arrangements to provide EDUCAUSE conference registration for all 30 fellowship recipients.
Coming into and at this second meeting, each of the 30 Fellows will develop a plan for their digital learning plan for their own institution that will focus on faculty understanding, training, and a campus strategy for supporting the appropriate use of digital curricular resources.
3. *New Orleans: late February 2018 (tentative date and venue).* Between the second and third retreats, the 30 Fellows will begin to roll out their campus plans for the adoption of digital learning and courseware resources at their campuses.

4. *Seattle, late June 2018* (tentative date and venue). At the final convening the 30 Fellows will present an assessment of their campus work, their individual plan to sustain the digital initiatives on their campus, and the plan to disseminate their work at professional meetings over the following 24 months.

What about the application process? What materials will I be required to provide as part of my application?

Applicants will have to complete a one page bio sheet, submit a copy of their CV, and provide short answers to several questions. Additionally, your president (or chancellor, or CEO) will have to provide a letter of support for your application. Applicants will also participate in a personal interview via SKYPE or ZOOM.

The fellowship application will be posted on the [ACAO web site](#) by March 24th. The application process will remain open through Friday, May 19th. ACAO will announce the names of 30 fellowship recipients at the end of May/early June.

What criteria will be used for selecting the 30 ACAO Digital Fellows?

ACAO and the Gates Foundation are looking for provosts and CAOs who are prepared to assume leadership positions in the campus and public conversations about digital pedagogy. Fellowship applications will be reviewed by several members of the project's Senior Leadership Group – other provosts/CAOs, many of who are members of the ACAO Board of Directors. The key review criteria will be responses to the short essay questions on the application, plus the letter of recommendation and institutional commitment from applicant's president/CEO.

For additional information about the ACAO Digital Fellows Project, please contact:

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Educating the Provosts

New fellowship for chief academic officers focuses on digital courseware.

By Scott Jaschik

In previous generations, the prime educational materials in higher education were to be found in libraries and laboratories. These days of course, digital materials are crucial -- to teaching, learning and assessment. But do senior academic leaders know the questions they should be asking about these digital educational tools?

The Association of Chief Academic Officers last week [announced](#) a new fellowship program for 30 provosts -- with support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Kenneth C. Green, founding director of the Campus Computing Project, will serve as the director of the Digital Fellows Program. CAOs who are interested in the fellowship may express interest via email to fellowship@acao.org.

Laura Niesen de Abruna, president of the Association of Chief Academic Officers and provost of York College of Pennsylvania, responded via email to questions about the new fellowship.



Laura Niesen de Abruna

Q: Why focus on the provost? Many provosts have designated a vice provost or someone else to take charge instructional innovation and digital learning initiatives. Why is it important for the provost to be as informed and involved in these campus efforts and investments efforts as this initiative suggests they can (and perhaps should) be?

A: We know that at many institutions, and especially among public comprehensive institutions and community colleges, the chief academic officer sets the academic and instructional priorities for initiatives that will be pursued during his or her tenure. Typically a CAO will focus on such issues as enhancing undergraduate teaching, student research or internship opportunities, internationalization, or service learning as part of their personal visions and institutional goals.

Our research indicates many CAOs are not familiar with the potential for digital pedagogy to improve undergraduate learning, retention, and persistence to graduation for their students. Although CAOs have come of age, both personally and professionally, with the technologies that are now ubiquitous across higher education, many remain skeptical about the impact and benefits of the often significant campus investments in instructional technology intended to improve student learning and institutional outcomes.

We hope that as CAOs better understand the link between effective digital pedagogical resources, student engagement, retention, and degree completion, digital pedagogy will move higher on the list of initiatives that are personally important to chief academic officers.

Q: Do you consider the needs of provosts different in terms of type of institution (ones that caters to at risk students vs. elite students)?

A: The academic and instructional priorities of chief academic officers may differ dramatically depending on the type of college, the mission of the institution, and the profile of the student population. The colleges and universities that serve large numbers of Pell-eligible, first generation, low income, or minority students will, understandably, focus more intentionally on access, retention, and persistence to graduation. For these reasons, the ACAO project will focus primarily, but not exclusively, on provosts and CAOs at public comprehensives and community colleges.

Q: How strong a link do you see between educational materials (digital and otherwise) and student success?

A: There is a growing body of research which confirms that students can and do learn more and pass more courses if they have access to effective digital course materials and experiences that