

LEVEL UP PROGRAM

UCI Student Center
& Event Services
University of California, Irvine

Submitted by
UCI Student Center
& Event Services
Marketing Manager
Brian Petyo



The Level Up Program

The Project

Graduands and academic departments agree that students are ready for the workforce. But hiring managers often appear to disagree. *The Level Up Program* is a web-based, student assessment and development system that addresses this perceived gap between what hiring managers need and expect from UC graduates with what traditional modes of learning assessments actually measure.

A video overview of the program provides a quick demonstration of special features that administrators and students see when logged in to the program.

The Problem

Hiring managers rely on institutions of higher learning for an increasingly knowledge-intensive and skilled workforce. Unfortunately, employers and universities assess workplace readiness differently. “96% of chief academic officers of colleges and universities believe that their institutions are very or somewhat effective at preparing students for the workforce, only 11% of business leaders strongly agree” according to a Gallup Education poll. Moreover, “Only 35% of college students say they are prepared for a job, and over half of recent graduates are unemployed or

underemployed” according to the same research and “Among the general public, just 16% of Americans think that a four-year degree prepares students for a well-paying job in today’s economy.” The problem isn’t that four-year degrees are outmoded or irrelevant. The relevance of higher education has increased as industry moves away from manufacturing and physically intensive labor toward technology, healthcare, and education. The problem is in how learning assessments are defined and how accurately traditional assessments align with desirable employment outcomes.

If a different approach to student assessment is not addressed, students could continue to receive low marks by hiring managers, which can negatively impact perceptions of a UC education.

The Solution

The problem was solved by leveraging relevant and contemporary technology that any UC employer or non-academic department could use for effective workplace learning assessments. These types of assessments align with post-graduation employment outcomes and with new ways for meaningful engagements with student employees and interns. Doing so integrates a student’s overall campus experience with desired employment and economic outcomes now and in all future professional settings.

The Program

The Level Up Program is a user-friendly website for professional development of student employees that uses elements of gaming theory, scores and rewards while progressing through four levels of employment with granting supervisors the ability to track and report progress. The program shares some similarities with other learning management systems. For example, supervisors can create, administer, and grade tests. But the program differs from all other learning management systems by focusing on employment learning outcomes not found in classroom environments.

Defining features include real-time interactive checklists, a Résumé Builder, customizable tests and quizzes, HR and administrative charts for reporting learning outcomes, automated processes for promoting and recognizing student employees, and customizable training programs.

The Team

The team itself is the result of a creative use of limited resources. With an ever-

increasing need for rapid application development and agility needed for a progressive University together with the Office of Information and Technology's backlog estimated at 300 projects, the marketing team tapped the often overlooked, vastly talented students in the School of Information of Computer Sciences and the Henry Samueli School of Engineering for help. The team consists of approximately four web developers, four mobile developers, and four UI/UX designers working under the direction of two full-time marketing department employees. For the same cost of one full-time Programmer Analyst I or II in the UC system, the Student Center could employ approximately 12 students for nearly triple the number of production hours while substantially increasing the specialty skills on the project.

As employees of the Student Center, the student developers embody the business-ready skills that *The Level Up Program* they are creating aims to measure. In essence, *The Level Up Program* and the team of student developers are themselves evidence of real-world business outcomes. The team grew in complexity and sophistication in 2019 and in early 2020, it was recognized as the sole recipient of the California Team Excellence Award by the California Council for Excellence.

With limited resources, the team was created and new work processes deployed that would result in the production of sophisticated applications such as Level Up. The same ingenuity and entrepreneurial spirit on the team is planning for UC-wide adoption of the program.

- Executive Sponsor: Interim Director Student Center & Event Services Amy Schulz
- Project Manager: Marketing Manager Brian Petyo
- UI/UX Designer: Marketing and Communications Specialist Diana Schombert
- Lead Web Developer: Student Tommy Patierno
- Web Developer: Student Chris Rodriguez
- UI/UX Designer: Student Rebekah Li
- UI/UX Designer: Soros Chok
- Content Matter Expert: HR Supervisor Erik Ramirez
- Content Matter Expert: Operations Supervisor Mike Strazzeri
- Content Matter Expert: Operations Manager Kendi Rosas Goss
- Content Matter Expert: Finance Manager Mehrnaz Ezzati
- Content Matter Expert: AV Supervisor Jerome Chuang

- Content Matter Expert: Office Manager Samantha Hulbert
- Content Matter Expert: AV Manager Daryl Han

The Technology

An Angular frontend with a C# backend using .NET and an MS SQL Server database hosted on an AWS server has provided the scalability needed for continued product improvements and growth. The user interface and user experience mock-ups were the product of the UCI Student Center marketing team.

Currently, the program architecture is being redesigned for a more modular and scalable system in anticipation of wide adoption of the program UC wide or beyond. An infrastructure allowing all UC departments to have a private, secured, and well-maintained *Level Up* account is currently in production. This includes plans for scaling databases, storage, and processing power for the anticipated increase in traffic.

Concerns for accessibility guide many of the design choices. Currently scoring 90 of 100 in a Google Lighthouse report, the team is developing a unified design guide to make the program accessible with a score of 100 out of 100. The unified design guide will also direct future design choices.

The Timeline

The L1-to-L4 progression of student employees began years prior to technological developments. Antiquated processes resulted in inconsistent management of the program. The program migrated to a large-scale solution solved temporarily by advanced calculations utilizing Google Sheets, Documents, and Shared Drives. But as the program matured and the workforce grew to over 200 employees across several departments with varying needs, the program migrated again to the web-based solution in its current form.

Marketing developed designs in August 2018, which were then set aside until the project resumed in 2019. It deployed in April 2019 with new features deployed monthly.

The Results

The Program has received strong interest from the Program Manager, Information and Operations at the University of Houston Student Center Andrea Trevino as well as from the Associate Director of Event Services and Campus Center Operations

at Stockton University in New Jersey Giancarlo Brugnolo and high praise from the Associate Vice President of Educational Programs of the WASC Senior College and University Commission Dave Chase. Not long after the program launched in 2019, it was recognized from among 2,800 submissions worldwide for a CASE District VII Circle of Excellence Silver Award and in 2020 it was selected as the sole recipient of nationally recognized ACUI Excellence in Training Programs award.

One of the earliest measures of success was the participation rate, which is displayed as a bar chart across all units currently showing a 95% participation amounting to 147 active logins and participation in the program out of our current 155 student employees. The program successfully tracks compliance with approximately 12 UCLC mandatory training modules for UC employees. It also displays Student Affairs Learning Outcomes scores based on four normalized dimensions in the areas of Problem Solving & Decision Making; Integrity & Professionalism; Collaboration & Teamwork; and Workplace Communication. Finally, test scores can be aggregated or disaggregated for analysis. Additional indications of performance are in development to correlate Level Up statistics with student employee engagement scores and customer satisfaction scores. In time, the program will provide case studies correlating student success in Level Up with future economic and employment outcomes for the students.

The automation of key and support work processes has increased efficiencies for supervisors and administrators. Employee promotions are automated requiring far less labor from HR staff and team supervisors. Employee onboarding and offboarding are automated resulting in faster processing times. Email reminders and notifications of delinquent training is automated, which results in significant time savings.

The increased efficiencies in HR and general administrative processes were so significant that users and early adopters of the program are requesting broadening the program to include tracking of full-time team member professional development and other activities.