



By Kristen Lepore

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Libraries across the nation roll out an accredited high school diploma program

Angie Velasquez discovered on Facebook that Los Angeles Public Library (LAPL) was offering a new free service in 2014: an online accredited high school diploma.

She was working full-time as a general manager at a bakery while taking classes toward her associate's degree at Los Angeles Harbor College.

"I've always done really well without my high school diploma, but there were a few classes that I wanted to take," she says. "At the time, I was thinking of possibly becoming a phlebotomist, but in order to take that class, I needed a high school diploma."

Her schedule was hectic, but the idea of finally obtaining a high school diploma was enticing.

Velasquez dropped out of high school her junior year. She says she fell behind after being enrolled in an algebra class that was too advanced. Signing up for summer school or taking the computer classes that her teachers suggested just weren't realistic.

"My living situation growing up wasn't the best," she says. "At a young age—at 14—I understood that I needed to work, save money. So when I turned 18 I could get out

and get a place of my own."

Velasquez, now 27, is one of 48 Los Angeles residents to receive a scholarship to participate in LAPL's Career Online High School. About six months in, she has completed 75% of the program.

How it happened

Gale Cengage Learning announced its partnership with Career Online High School (COHS) in January 2014. The curriculum is accredited through AdvancED Accreditation Commission, a private nonprofit agency.

"COHS's nontraditional academic format reengages dropouts who have previously experienced educational trauma in a traditional academic environment," says Teresa Salafrio, COHS director of academics and principal of schools. "Returning to a traditional high school was not an option for most of our students."

Gale, which had been offering courses on its own for those seeking a high school diploma, decided to shape its program for the public library, says Senior Vice President of Global Product Management Frank Menchaca.

"Since the Great Recession, public libraries have really been transforming in some pretty interesting ways," he says. "They are still very much about education, about supplying materials to people who want educational and informational materials, but I think the way they're going about doing that is changing. There's a lot more emphasis on programming versus just content acquisition."



Mario Rideaux, COHS student at Sacramento Public Library, and Volunteer Services Coordinator Cathy Crosthwaite discuss next steps.

As of October, nine libraries had signed up to offer COHS and three had launched. LAPL, which has 73 branches and serves more than 4 million people, was the first. Sacramento Public Library (SPL) and the Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County in Ohio quickly followed suit. Other participating libraries include Chattanooga (Tenn.) Public Library; Fountaindale Public Library District in Bolingbrook, Illinois; San Diego Public Library; County of Los Angeles Public Library; New Orleans Public Library; and New Jersey State Library, which will be organizing the programs at six libraries in the state.

LAPL City Librarian John Szabo says he was interested in offering the program to Los Angeles residents after heading a successful GED program at Atlanta–Fulton Public Library System in Georgia.

“People really connected with the fact that the library, by being involved in this educational endeavor, was having an impact on workforce development, on economic development,” he says. “And so here in Los Angeles, we certainly do work around GED, but the idea of being able to, through the public library, deliver an accredited high school diploma—all that that means and how that empowers someone, how that prepares someone for the workforce—that’s just fantastic.”

According to Szabo, offering an online diploma was just another step toward empowering the local community with an education tool.

“In Los Angeles, our supporters, our patrons, very much see the public library as an institution that is about learning and about empowerment; about helping people find jobs, helping

people take their first step on the path to citizenship. So the public library plays a very dynamic role,” he says.

How it works

COHS is intended for adult learners. Its champions hope the program will help the approximately 12% of adults (ages 25 and over) living in the US without a high school diploma. Since COHS received accreditation in February 2012, the program has enrolled about 2,000 students on the enterprise side, with a retention rate of 66%. Gale expects a few hundred students across the country to be enrolled through libraries in 2014.

Each library can customize its enrollment process. In both Los Angeles and Sacramento, prospective students must live in the library’s service area and be at least 19 years old to apply.

“The State of California provides services to people under the age of 19, so we are targeting people who have aged out of those options,” says SPL Director Rivkah K. Sass.

At SPL, there are four gates through which each candidate must pass:

- Self-Assessment: 13 questions to verify basic qualifications, such as age, residence, grade level, etc.
- Prerequisite Course: The candidate has two weeks to complete this first course in the Career Certificate Program of his or her choice.
- In-person interview with the SPL enrollment team.
- Completion of the next two courses in his or her Career Certificate Program within 30 days.

The library’s role is to market the pro-

In Los Angeles, patrons see the public library as a dynamic institution that is about learning and empowerment.

gram both internally among staff and externally in the community, says Sass. It's responsible for creating enrollment procedures that will work in their community and employing an effective enrollment team that will assist students through the process.

"What the library does not have to do is worry about the COHS online platform or the academic tutoring," Sass says. "The COHS teachers, coaches, and IT are hands-on and excited to help their students in any way they can."

The curriculum varies from the typical high school setting. Students choose from one of eight career fields, including child care and education, office management, and homeland security. Each student is assigned an academic coach who welcomes the student to the program and monitors his or her progress throughout.

If a student hasn't logged on in a while, he or she can expect a check-in phone call or email from an assigned academic coach.

Mario Rideaux, a student in SPL's COHS, wanted to get a job as a correctional officer but couldn't because he didn't have a high school diploma. He called the library before COHS launched and spoke to the adult literacy supervisor, who encouraged him to wait and enroll in the online program.

"For someone like me who has to hold down a job, a house, and two little kids, you have to be able to squeeze school in," Rideaux says. "Sometimes I'm dead tired, but I do it. I cram it into my weekends. If I had to go to a school all day long, I'd have to quit my job, I'd lose my house."

The ability to create his own schedule is key, he says. And the COHS curriculum has been effective.

"It's perfect the way they have it designed," says Rideaux. "If you miss something in a quiz, it brings you back to that page and makes you read it again. By the time you read it two or three times, it's stuck in your brain."

Rideaux is working with the library's Volunteer Services Coordinator Cathy Crosthwaite, whose role is to motivate and guide students through the application process, hit deadlines, and attend monthly cohort meetings.

"Mario has proven to be not just an excellent student but also an exceptional spokesperson for the COHS program," she says. "His story, although unique, speaks to so many in our society that need a second chance to fulfill their career goals."

Who's paying for it

The library purchases these scholarships from Gale on behalf of the student. Some libraries use private funds while others use grant money.

The Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), for example, supports

SPL's program—which had awarded 35 scholarships as of October—under the provisions of the Library Services and Technology Act. The act is administered in California by the State Librarian and in partnership with the Califa Group, a nonprofit consortium representing more than 220 libraries in the state and elsewhere.

LAPL is covering the cost of the scholarships with private funds from its foundation. Szabo says he hopes to fill a total of 125 slots this year, with each one costing the library between \$1,200 and \$1,500. As of October, it's spent approximately \$70,200 on 52 scholarships.

Budgeting for these financial costs comes with added pressure, and it's critical that students stay motivated, says Szabo. That's why he and his staff are looking to the 21 literacy centers at various branch libraries to recruit students for this program.

Thirteen such students gathered at a Saturday morning literacy class at LAPL's Central Library to talk about current events. They're of all ages, and most are Mexican or Chinese immigrants.

LAPL teacher Barry Lank asks students what they've been reading in the news that week. As the discussion progresses, he writes key topics and common themes on a whiteboard and continues to explain parts of speech.

Lank says every class and literacy center is different. Since he specializes in English as a second language (ESL), he gets many students from other countries who are looking to improve their English-speaking skills. Szabo agrees that each literacy center differs based on the needs of that community. The most important part is that the adult learners are voluntarily participating.

"[The students] are in many cases already engaged in the literacy program, so they are working on those skills at the same time they are taking these [COHS] classes," he explains. "The goal for some is to find employment. For others, it's about all of the pride that a high school diploma carries."

The bigger picture



One of the greatest distinctions between Career Online High School and a traditional high school is flexibility.

One of the greatest distinctions between COHS and a traditional high school is flexibility. Students can work anytime from anywhere. That online atmosphere, Menchaca says, "helps address the educational trauma that leads a student to drop out in the first place."

The program's career component offers students real-world application by giving them the knowledge and skills to enter the workforce, says Menchaca.

"What came through is that they have a negative association with going to

school or for getting that degree, but the public library is considered sort of neutral ground,” he says. “People who haven’t graduated from high school don’t associate the public library with that same kind of downer atmosphere that they might have had in school.”

Nationally, more high school students are staying in school, according to October Census Bureau data. In 2013, 7% of the nation’s 18-to-24-year-olds had dropped out of high school. This illustrates a decline from the 12% dropout rate in 2000.

That number isn’t as impressive in California. During the 2012–2013 school year, the dropout rate was 11.6%.

Recognized as a “dropout factory” in filmmaker Davis Guggenheim’s *Waiting for Superman*, Los Angeles Unified School District’s Roosevelt High School in Boyle Heights has come a long way. Its dropout rate has improved from 23.8% in 2007–2008 to 5.1% in 2012–2013.

Although California’s graduation rate was 80% in 2013, some students are still struggling to get by. Long-term substitute teacher Joe Carreno helps run Roosevelt’s Apex Learning credit recovery program, a digital curriculum that aims to boost graduation rates and aid students who have fallen behind.

Many of his students who are struggling to graduate don’t have internet access at home, he says, and they “need a lot of support.” COHS could be “a nice plan B, because plan A looks really intimidating,” he says.

Carreno hadn’t heard that the library was offering online high school diplomas. It could be a viable option for his students, he says, but he worries that once they drop out, they won’t go back—especially because you have to be 19 to apply to COHS, and students drop out before then. Nevertheless, if the program is advertised and offered to these students, it could fill a void, he says.

“The reason they leave is because there’s chaos; there’s really not going to be moments of clarity unless this is brought to them,” he says. “If it’s a program that’s brought to [and promoted at] the school, I think it’s a great idea.”

The expansion plan

Still in its infancy, the program has graduated two people from LAPL. The first person took about seven months to complete and graduated in August; the second person graduated in October. For someone who may have more classes to make up, it could take up to 18 months.

“It is rewarding to hear the success stories of students who have graduated from COHS,” says its director, Salafrio. “Our students share that upon graduating and earning their accredited high school diploma and entry-level workforce certificate, they feel empowered to either pursue a post-secondary certificate/degree pathway or to advance in the workplace. This is the essence of why we created COHS—to reengage adults back into the educa-



Ann Wu works with teacher Barry Lank at the Caroline and Henry E. Singleton Adult Literacy Center at Central Library in downtown Los Angeles.

tional system and to provide them with the opportunity to improve their lives.”

Menchaca would like to see COHS offered as a standard product in every major urban public library “where there is an acute need for educational resources.”

In Sacramento, Sass says she’ll be working to turn strong community support into more scholarships.

“We believe this program has the potential to reposition the library as a provider of education,” she says.

As of October, SPL had received more than 300 inquiries about COHS.

But before the program can really grow, Szabo says its success must be measured.

“Once we get them up and running, we want to be able to report on the efficacy of the program and push that out to public libraries nationwide to say, ‘Here’s what we’ve found so far with our early adopter libraries.’ So we see it as a national program,” he says.

Ultimately, libraries piloting COHS expect diploma recipients to become loyal library users and supporters, if they aren’t already.

“They are going to be library supporters, advocates by virtue of coming into our libraries and receiving something so valuable as a diploma,” Szabo says. “They are going to inevitably take advantage of other programs that the library offers if they haven’t already.”

Eventually, he’d like to see a graduation ceremony at the library. SPL’s ceremony is slated for June 2015. ■



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