

# CfA Learning Environment (CLE)

**TOOL:** CfA Learning Environment (CLE), a Salesforce-based learning management system

**GOAL:** A comprehensive platform for students and administrators aligned with a competency-based learning model

**BREAK THROUGH MODEL:** College for America

## Why was this tool developed?

Tracking postsecondary students' progress to degree in a program in which every learner is working on a different project at a different pace—without the boundaries of courses—is a complicated undertaking. **The innovative competency-based model of Southern New Hampshire University's College for America (CfA) required a system to serve multiple purposes for both students and administrators, from project assignment and submission to tracking financial aid status: Salesforce provided the solution.**

Multiple traditional data systems would have been unwieldy. CfA tried a few traditional systems, but those were designed to track time-limited courses and GPA—not competencies. "In order to keep the CfA price-point low, we needed a system that would

integrate the handful of data systems already in use at SNHU," says Chief Technology Officer Brian Peddle, "but would also serve as a user-friendly interface for the student."

Familiar with Salesforce, a commercial product to manage relationships with customers, the CfA team imagined that Salesforce could track students' progress in the same way it tracks customers' actions.

Through partnerships with Business Innovation Factory (2012) and Zurb (2013), CfA created a front-end interface to work with Salesforce, resulting in a new LMS built for CfA's specific needs. In the eight-month pilot, students tested and further informed the ongoing design of the platform. After several iterations, CfA officially launched on October 1, 2013 with CfA's Learning Environment V.1 (CLE).

## How is it different?

CLE is a student and educator portal that also provides data management and reporting in service to CfA's non-linear, self-directed model of learning. CLE is completely web-based; all data are stored in the Salesforce Cloud and Salesforce automatically updates the product—freeing the CfA technology team from managing the software updates and servers required of traditional systems. This allows them to focus on their primary

goal of making the product so intuitive and supportive that students focus on learning, not the technology.

As a web-based platform, CLE moves new projects or system enhancements to students nearly immediately. The platform integrates other technology tools, including Google Drive, YouTube, and Google Plus, which allows students to network and collaborate. Through CLE, students upload and download work in all formats, including audio and video files.

## What is the advantage for students?

The cost efficiencies of Salesforce help keep the annual CfA student tuition to \$2,500. With CLE, students can access the curriculum at all times and continue their work at their convenience, supporting CfA's flexible, competency-based model. Through CLE, students can schedule projects, track due dates, explore projects and their associated competencies, set personal reminders, access resources, upload files, access support, connect with their Coach and learning communities, and view their degree progress (tracked as competencies as well as credits mapped to traditional SNHU courses).

Graduates can present current and future employers with a view of their accomplishments and connections in real-world terms through features of CLE that provide a competency statement and reference letters from their Learning Coach. CfA is considering integration of LinkedIn and the ability for students to showcase projects in a future release.



**“CfA's Learning Environment was designed to engage the learner on his or her path to degree completion. On the back end, it is the robust data management, combined with ongoing student feedback, that will allow us to continue to iterate and deliver personalized learning at scale.”**

**Yvonne Simon, Chief Learning Architect**

## How does it improve learning?

One of the many promises of competency-based learning is to focus students' effort on learning rather than on passing courses. CLE supports this by **streamlining student-educator interactions**: online project submission; communication between students, Reviewers, and Coaches; and feedback and revision. Reviewers provide personalized feedback through CLE within 24-48 hours after a student submits a project. Reviewers specifically acknowledge rubric criteria that have been met and give targeted suggestions to help students master any criteria where they have received a "not yet."

The platform allows administrators to **place automated "triggers"** on almost any data point in the system to help students stay on pace. Both students and Coaches are notified when students miss a scheduled due date, for example, which allows Coaches to reach out to students to address their challenges and preserve their momentum. CfA students know they are on track with Kudos, a system that tracks their academic activity based on the CfA learning model. Kudos are awarded both automatically by CLE (e.g., for scheduling or submitting projects) and by Coaches for overcoming personal challenges.

Kudos gives CfA visibility into how students work, how they connect, and how they progress towards their goals. By earning 10 Kudos each week, a requirement to stay actively enrolled, students participate in activities that lead to engagement and ultimately to degree completion. In addition, surveys provide students with an opportunity for project reflection.

One of the five drivers of "productive persistence"—ongoing tenacity and use of effective strategies (see the Carnegie Foundation's [actionable framework](#))—is the connection to CfA through peers, Coaches, and employer-based mentors. CLE helps students easily connect with peers who are in their "class" (students working on the same competencies), with students working at a similar pace, with students working collaboratively on projects, and with other stakeholders who can help them complete their degree and move towards their career and professional goals.

## What is the advantage for instructors and administrators?

**Cost:** With a non-profit discount, Salesforce costs about \$12 per year per student (compared to \$18 for a traditional LMS CfA tried unsuccessfully). Cost efficiencies accrue because CfA saves on server and software costs, because CLE serves multiple purposes, and because CfA can be almost completely paperless with every submission and communication taking place through CLE.

**Analytics:** CfA administrators can better understand the multiple dimensions of student persistence through CLE's analytics, a feature that can become increasingly sophisticated as enrollment increases. With this information, administrators can develop interventions to help move students closer to degree completion. The analytics can inform when feedback can be automated and when human interaction is needed.

**Centralized information system:** For Coaches and Reviewers, the platform is a one-stop source to track student data from application

through graduation. CLE also tracks all interactions between students and Coach, which Coach and Reviewer Team-leads use to help supervise their teams. Reviewer Team-leads, for example, can make sure Reviewers are returning feedback within 48-hours. Coach Team-leads can see how students progress from week to week and make sure Coach outreach is effective, timely, and targeted.

## What are the challenges?

Despite the advantages, putting a commercial product to use for students requires some imagination and programming expertise. Brian Peddle credits SNHU with attracting the right technology team to adapt Salesforce for use by CfA easily and cost-effectively. Peddle says that finding people who can program in APEX (Salesforce's proprietary programming language) can be a challenge. But with a skilled team of about five people, SNHU developed the first version in less than one year.

## What's next?

Student testing and feedback are integral to improving CLE. To this end, CfA uses an iterative testing and development cycle. The technology team is expanding the tools that allow further student networking and collaboration and also those that track resource access and usage. In the next phase of development, CfA will add a streamlined Onboarding process, a Coach and Employer Dashboard, and a Career Center. With the ability to seamlessly integrate other tools (Turnitin and Wistia are next for CfA) to provide new functionalities, the CfA team believes there is no limit to the scalability of the platform.

## ARTIFACT:

CLE Screenshots.

Student Dashboard and Sample Project Overview

**COLLEGE for AMERICA** DASHBOARD GOALS

Welcome to College for America, Connie January 19, 2014

7% 353 kudos

### Activity Feed

IN PROGRESS MASTERED FEEDBACK MESSAGES ALL

You sent a message to your Coach.  
Testing  
SEPTEMBER 30, 2013 03:01 PM

**CONNIE COACHTEST** DECEMBER 20, 2013 09:12 AM  
Hi connie!

Write a Comment... **ADD COMMENT**

### Connections

### To-Do

Add an item to your to-do list **ADD**

**ORIENTATION**

- Take the Tour
- Learn about your Program
- Learn about Academic Honesty
- Learn about Completing Projects and Mastering Competencies
- Learn about Working with your Coach

DASHBOARD / GOALS / ACCESS INFORMATION / BLUE PATH:GMOs:GOOD OR BAD?

Overview and Directions  
Deliverables  
Project Resources  
Skill Building Resources  
Rubric

SCHEDULED: 12/12/2013

**SUBMIT WORK**

**RECORD AUDIO**

1 GMOs: GOOD OR BAD? 2 IN TODAY'S EPISODE ...

## GMOs: Good or Bad?

Status: Scheduled

**COMPETENCIES TO MASTER**

- Can recognize flaws and inconsistencies in an argument
- Can develop and support an argument
- Can recognize and articulate the ethical and moral implications of an issue

### Overview

More and more farmers and food manufacturers are genetically modifying their crops to reduce susceptibility to disease, improve flavor, and reduce costs. That means that more of the foods on our grocery store shelves are made with ingredients that contain Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs). But while manufacturers claim the foods are safe, many people are concerned about the health effects. In this Project, you will write an opinion editorial ("op-ed") that takes a position on this controversial subject.



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## USE IT:

- Salesforce is a fee-based commercial product.  
<http://www.salesforce.com>
- Contact Brian Peddle to learn how CfA customized their solution.  
[b.peddle@snhu.edu](mailto:b.peddle@snhu.edu)

## FOR MORE INFORMATION:

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