

Career Online High School Program

Overview: The Career Online High School (COHS) program offers Orange County adults the opportunity to earn an accredited high school diploma, while gaining workforce skills.

Challenge: In Orange County, more than 480,000 adults do not have a high school diploma or equivalent. Adults without a high school diploma, compared to high school graduates, earn lower wages, pay fewer taxes, are more likely to be on welfare and are far less healthy. (Belfield, C. & Levin, H., 2007). Specifically, studies reveal that adults without a high school diploma earn \$10,000 less annually than those with a high school education, experience a 4% higher unemployment rate than the national average, and have a higher chance of living in poverty.

For many adults, the decision to re-enter or enter an educational program, can be challenging. Adults with work and family responsibilities must learn to balance various commitments to ensure that they are successfully advancing in their coursework. Additionally, many adults have difficulty accessing classes that meet their work and family obligations. For those who work full-time or have multiple jobs, it is difficult to attend classes and complete assignments. Many, if not all, educational programs have a cost associated, which can be an added difficulty for learners who do not have the financial resources. The COHS program, available through Orange County Public Libraries (OCPL), addresses these challenges by offering students a free opportunity to earn a diploma using an online platform where students study at their own pace, in their own environment, and on their own schedule.

Innovative Solution: In September of 2016, OCPL partnered with Gale (a part of Cengage Learning), the San Clemente Friends of the Library, and the California State Library to offer adults the opportunity to earn an accredited high school diploma, while gaining career skills in various employment fields.

The COHS program works to ensure student success with these features:

- a flexible, anytime-anywhere online platform
- self-paced, mastery learning instructional method
- core academic curriculum aligned to national standards
- academic coaches and certified support instructors for multiple layers of assistance
- the opportunity to learn a new career skill along with core academics
- career guidance and resources to prepare students for the workforce

Academic curriculum is supported by board-certified instructors and students have 24/7 access to the online learning platforms. The coursework begins in one of eight high-growth, high-demand career fields, before progressing to the core academic subjects. Many students are able to graduate in as few as 4 to 6 months by transferring in previously earned high school credits. Once enrolled, COHS pairs each student with an academic coach, who provides the student with an individual career path, offers ongoing guidance, evaluates performance and connects the student with the resources needed to master the courses. Students can send for their transcripts from previous schools that they have attended, and receive credit for coursework already completed. The learners have up to 18 months to complete the program and earn their high school diploma.

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Originality: This program is unique in that it helps establish public libraries as more than book depositories. OCPL provides programs, materials and services that are designed to engage and serve diverse communities. The COHS is an invaluable resource to the community. Adults have the opportunity of pursuing a high school degree through an online platform that provides accessibility, allows for life and work balance, academic and moral support from library and Gale staff and it is completely free of charge to the student. In today's economy, a high school diploma is needed in a competitive job market and higher education enrollment.

The Cost of the Program: The COHS program was made possible through a partnership with the San Clemente Friends of the Library and the California State Library. The California State Library awards OCPL a number of scholarships made available for adult learners wanting to earn their high school diploma. Each scholarship is valued at \$1,095. The online platform and academic coaching is provided by Gale directly. In collaboration with the San Clemente Friends and Gale, OCPL will continue serving Orange County residents and increasing the number of adults who have a high school diploma in the county.

The Results: Currently, there a total of 13 adult learners enrolled and working towards earning their high school diploma. Since program inception, four learners have completed the program and one has enrolled at the local community college to pursue a music degree. Every student is working at his/her pace, but with the assistance and support of the academic coach, everyone has a desired program completion date.

One of the recent graduates- credited the flexibility of the program, the scholarship from OCPL, and his academic counselors at COHS for his success. "Having this diploma has really given me a sense of confidence more than anything, and I really feel that I can now work on getting a college degree," he said. "I can also now, without a twinge of guilt, encourage my kids in their schooling and stress the importance of getting their diploma."

Our most recent graduate, shared the following:

"I first and foremost got this diploma for my family and myself. I lost my father when I was 15, he passed suddenly. So after a lot of bad choices in my life it was my chance to redeem myself. The program taught me discipline, confidence, guidance, and acceptance. To accept your failures as lessons in life, to keep going no matter what you've done wrong in the past. So I fought through it all and managed to graduate. It feels great knowing I'll have that to keep in my heart forever! As far as school goes, well I'd love to focus on music. It's honestly the only thing I've ever truly enjoyed and ever really done right. I am hopeful and incredibly grateful I was given this opportunity."

OCPL is proud to be able to offer the COHS as part of its library programs and resources for the Orange County community. The students' achievements are a great example of the social and economic impact that libraries can have!