



## News

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### Gates Goes Open

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Proprietary in his beta phase, Bill Gates 2.0 is all about sharing the wealth. And he is asking his latest crop of higher ed benefactors to do likewise.

[Next Generation Learning Challenges](#), or NGLC -- a grant program run by Educause and fueled mostly by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation -- gave the bulk of its first round of "challenge grants" to university-led projects aimed at either increasing access to college degree programs or supplying free, top-flight online learning materials to colleges that could not otherwise afford them.

About half of NGLC's \$10.4-million pie went to seven applicants tagged as "open core courseware" projects, which include institutions involved in lowering barriers to college degrees as well as university-based efforts to develop high-quality course modules for institutions working with underprepared students and scant resources, so as to usher more students through to graduation. NGLC gave each of the "open core courseware" projects \$750,000 -- three times as much as it gave any other type of project.

Netting the second largest piece of the pie were the nine "blended learning" projects, many of which also focus on broadening access to online courses and course materials. The "learner analytics" category had six winners, and the "deeper learning and engagement" category had seven. With one exception, each winner in these categories got \$250,000.

Ira Fuchs, the executive director of NGLC, told *Inside Higher Ed* that the distinctions were sometimes arbitrary, given how many of the winning projects could fall in more than one category. Some -- such as Carnegie Mellon's Open Learning Initiative -- fit the criteria of all four. But projects heavy on the development of open courses got more money than the others because building quality courses costs a lot, Fuchs said.

The University of California, one of the open core courseware projects, plans to use its \$750,000 toward a current effort to develop 50 credit-bearing online courses designed to bridge the gap between community colleges and four-year degree programs in California. That university system, which is facing \$500 million [or more](#) in budget cuts, has [talked about](#) expanding its online offerings in order to close an [expected "enrollment gap"](#) that could soon force the system to shut out qualified students.

Like the other winning projects, the University of California effort was already under way. More than to jumpstart new ideas, the objective of the grants was to draw out existing projects that have smart plans for increasing college completion and give a boost to those that are most likely to go viral, Fuchs said. For example, as a condition of taking the NGLC money, California had to promise to make its courses openly available once they are built.

One of the goals of the NGLC grants is to eliminate the bias at many colleges against using courses and technology that they did not invent themselves, said Fuchs. The winning projects represent innovations that Gates and the other sponsors think will not only get students into college and out with a degree, but will also be adopted by many different institutions, he said. Hence the emphasis on "open" projects.

Perhaps in part because of this emphasis on openness, NGLC says that very few of the 600 applications it fielded last fall came from for-profit companies. While some commercial technology vendors stand to benefit from the grants by virtue of their contracts with the winning colleges, only one for-profit company managed to win a full grant all for itself.

Inquus, a software company, will get \$250,000 from NGLC for a project it says will make existing open educational resources, such as MIT OpenCourseWare, more valuable to users. Its plan is to build out to do this by building out a courseware-oriented social network that “enable[s] students to connect, collaborate, mentor, and study together” around otherwise static syllabuses, worksheets, and instructional texts, the company says.

Inquus’s theory is that even if people cannot earn degrees by using open courseware outside of a university setting, they will at least learn more if they are able to discuss the materials with other users as though they were members of a virtual classroom. “Online courseware alone does not offer a supportive learning experience or the engagement and motivation needed for retention and effective learning,” Inquus said in its proposal. The company says it hopes to pick up as clients the various universities that use open courseware, and triple its current 30,000-student user base on the strength of its challenge grant.

A full list of the grant winners in each category is available on the [NGLC website](#).

NGLC plans to “double down” on the most successful projects eventually, although Fuchs said there is currently no plan for how many of the projects will get a second infusion of grant money. But he said the program will favor those projects that can prove they can get a lot of colleges to adopt them and continue to demonstrate effectiveness at scale. For such projects, NGLC has another \$10 million of Bill Gates’s money in its other pocket.

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— **Steve Kolowich**