

Connections Academy Case Study
Peyvand Ghofrani
UMUC

Introduction

- This presentation covers Connections Academy fulltime virtual school, as well as more specific focus on the Nevada Connections Academy. This mixture not only reflects the reality of outsourcing by State virtual schools, but is also the best way to use the available literature and resources to effectively describe Connections Academy.
- The overarching theme of this presentation is that choices, flexibility, and learner-centered instruction offered by Connections Academy allow parents and students to optimally meet their education needs with online learning.

Introduction (cont.)

- The following are covered: School overview, regulatory environment, school curriculum and scope of offerings, instruction, socialization, policy, government support, diversity of student body, clubs and extracurricular activities, sports, flexibility and choice, reasons why families choose Connections Academy, money matters, graduation, and satisfaction ratings.
- Web links are embedded in text as hyperlinks and youtube links are stand-alone. You may view them by right clicking each → selecting “open hyperlink” from dropdown menu.

Overview of School

- Connections Academy is a complete K-12 public school in the home (ConnectionsAcademy1, 2011 May).
 - Parents work as learning coaches—training course is offered
 - Students work under direction of certified teachers
 - Lessons are on the computer but students interact with their teachers and also use textbooks
 - Teachers use social learning activities like “story time” where students read a book in advance and then discuss live with other students and the teacher
- Many students participate in social clubs, and field trips are offered regularly to meet the interest and schedule of all students and parents (ConnectionsAcademy1, 2011 May).

Company Profile

- In 2011 Connections Academy operated tuition-free K-12 public schools in 18 states.
- The Connections Academy schools served more than 30,000 students in K-12 in the 2010-2011 school year.
- In 2012, Connections Academy expanded to cover Georgia, Iowa, Louisiana, Oklahoma, and Utah (Connections Academy, 2012b).

Nevada Connections Academy

- Mission: To help each student maximize his or her potential and meet the highest performance standards through a uniquely individualized learning program
- Organizational Structure:
 - Principal: Jennifer Dukek
 - Assistant Principals: Maureen Cotner (grades 7-12), Karen Grant (grades K-6)
 - Counseling Staff:
 - Jim McLaughlin, Mgr. of Counseling Services (advisor for grade 12)
 - Stephanie Lee (grades 9–11)
 - Lisa Malabago (grades 9–11)
 - Rebecca Young (grades 9–11)
 - Kristine Sliter (grade 8)
 - T. J. Wolfe (grade 7)

(Nevada Connections Academy, 2011)

Nevada Connections Academy (cont.)

- NCA has a total annual enrollment of 1500 students in grades K-12.
- Fully accredited by the Northwest Accreditation Commission (NWAC) Provisional Accreditation.
- 63 certified/licensed professional staff—27 have earned advanced degrees
- School is in session 180 days between the months of August and June
- Students are able to earn up to six credits during the school year

(Nevada Connections Academy, 2011)

Regulatory

- Connections Academy students in Indiana, Nevada, and other states are required to check in for class and spend a certain number of hours learning each week (Erdahl, 2012).
- Students must fulfill socialization and PE requirements set by each state:
 - Meeting once per week at a local park, etc.
 - Outside play activities like jump-rope or bicycling each day (Erdahl, 2012; ConnectionsAcademy1, 2010 Sept).

Nevada Connections Academy Curriculum

- A diverse and comprehensive array of courses are offered for [elementary](#), [middle](#), and [high school](#) students (Nevada Connections Academy, 2012b).
- High school AP courses: Art History, Biology, Calculus, Computer Science, English Language, English Literature, Environmental Science, Macroeconomics, Microeconomics, Physics, Psychology, French, Spanish, Statistics, U.S. Government, U.S. History, and World History.
- High school Honors courses: Algebra I, Algebra 2, American Government, Biology, Chemistry, Earth Science, English 9–12, Geometry, Physical Science, Pre-calculus, U.S. History, and World History
(Nevada Connections Academy, 2011)

Instruction at Connections Academy

- Each student receives individualized instruction that is tailored to his or her strengths and weakness (Roller, 2010).
- Virtual teachers are available by phone, email, and live sessions to help students in real time (Lindstrom, 2012).
- Teachers feel that the curriculum is more challenging than traditional b&m schools, and they have more one-on-one interaction with students and parents (Lynott, 2011)

Instruction (cont.)

- Nevada Connections Academy utilizes cutting edge [instruction](#) that bring learning to life. The school makes a sampling of lessons available online for hands on assessment by parents and students that are considering enrollment (Nevada Connections Academy, 2012a).
- This video shows the instructional design process at Connections Academy:
<http://youtu.be/dYmv1dutLkE>
(connectionsacademy, 2011 Sept)

Socialization at Connections Academy

- Monthly field trips are offered for students and their family—they are learning experiences that complement class instruction (Roller, 2010).
- Students interact via email, phone calls, and video messaging (Lindstrom, 2012).
- Students get together for a purpose, and not just to hang out. Because students don't meet too often they only get the good sides of one another.
- Shy students, or those that had been isolated due to medical conditions have actually become more socialized compared to their b&m schools (Davis, 2011).

Policies That Affect Connections Academy

- Connections Academy works with each state to ensure state requirements are met (Gustke, 2010).
- Specific challenges and variations exist across states:
 - Oregon has enrollment caps on schools
 - Rural Iowa superintendents have wondered whether it is legal to transfer cost of educating students to outside for-profit—it is (Gustke, 2010; Hogan, 2012).
- Connections Academy must meet (Wiser, 2012):
 - State teacher licensure and accreditation standards
 - Administer standardized tests, and
 - Have curriculum that meets state standards.

Government Officials Support Connections Academy

- Iowa's governor supports online learning and has described it as making schools fit students instead of the other way around, as is often seen in the industrial model of education in b&m schools (Wiser, 2012).
- Nevada's governor read Dr. Seuss's "Oh the Places You'll Go" to all Connections Academy students across the state, via online connection (ConnectionsAcademy1, 2011 May).
- One California superintendent says that it provides the opportunity to reach more kids in unique ways, and that the surface has barely been scratched (Lindstrom, 2012).

Diversity of Students

- A variety of students, some with special needs, excel at Connections Academy:
 - Shy, overwhelmed in b&m setting (ConnectionsAcademy1, 2011 June)
 - Bullied Students: <http://youtu.be/gX2wnUcnS1I> (connectionsacademy, 2012 April)
 - Professional Entertainers: http://youtu.be/fl1XYV4_8sl (ConnectionsAcademy1, 2010 Jan)
 - Nationally Competing Athletes: http://youtu.be/AY30ZgTL1_c (ConnectionsAcademy1, 2009 October)
 - Performing Artists: <http://youtu.be/y1pjH5QIJSU> (connectionsacademy, 2011 Sept)
 - Students with Health Problems: <http://youtu.be/65Gom9OENu4> (connectionsacademy, 2012 May)
- Connections Academy offers special academic tracks for talented and gifted students: Performing Arts, Sports, and Math-and-Science Academy
<http://www.connectionsacademy.com/our-program/specialty-programs.aspx>
(Connections Academy, 2012e)

Clubs and Extracurricular Activities

- Connections Academy offers a variety of clubs and social activities for any interest (ConnectionsAcademy1, 2011 April 1; ConnectionsAcademy1, 2011 May 1; ConnectionsAcademy1, 2011 May 25; Connections Academy1, 2011 March 25):
- Environmental Club
- Student Leadership & Service Club
- Robotics Club
- The Monitor Newspaper
- Art Clubs
- Pen Pal Club
- Chess Club
- Science in the Kitchen Club
- Science Fair Club
- Math Clubs
- Quiz Bowl
- Book Club
- National History Day Club
- http://youtu.be/R_8oGxfyRdc (see examples of Connections Academy Clubs here)

Sports: The Honey Badgers—A Unique Football Team

- Eastern Christian Academy and its football team the Honey Badgers is made up entirely of students attending National Connections Academy (Jenkins, 2012).
- 40 college coaches have flocked to the team, which has no physical location or school, scholarships in hand—some for students that could not have played high school football or gone on to college any other way (Jenkins, 2012).
- Coaches of other teams have described the Honey Badgers in positive terms, however in August of this year a high school team from Philadelphia refused to play the Honey Badgers because the team has yet to be recognized by Maryland's state association (Silary, 2012).

Flexibility and Choice

- More typical students benefit from flexibility that Connections Academy offers as well. Those taking Summer school can do so while studying outside and enjoying the sunshine, being employed, or enjoying vacation with their family (ConnectionsAcademy, 2011 May 13).
- Connections Academy is not for everyone: Many students thrive in b&m settings while lots of kids do well in CA. The goal is to give families choices and let them decide what's best for their child (Erdahl, 2012).

Why Families Choose Connections Academy?

- Students wake up later than their peers attending b&m schools (Lindstrom, 2012). The later wake time is beneficial for learning (National Sleep Foundation, 2011).
- Parents closely monitor student progress while having access to accredited teachers and comprehensive curriculum (Lindstrom, 2012).
- Fewer distractions during learning (Erdahl, 2012).
- Integrated learner-centered approach, maintain family bond, etc. (ConnectionsAcademy1, 2011 June 22) <http://youtu.be/ka3yW6Q-iw>

Why Families Choose Connections Academy? (cont.)

- Student explains that “it is not as crazy and hectic as a regular classroom is, and I’m able to work at my own pace.”
- Parent says that what goes on in much of b&m public school today is “teaching the tests”—this and increases in class sizes are reasons she has chosen Connections Academy for her daughters (ConnectionsAcademy1, 2011 Sept 8).
- Parents saw online school as weird at first but changed their mind due to budget cuts and increasing b&m classroom sizes (Campbell, 2012).

The Money Factor

- Tuition that would have been spent in the school district for each child goes to Connections Academy—there is no charge to families (ConnectionsAcademy1, 2010 Sept 8).
- California, like many states, has cut the per student budget but due to Connection Academy's business model and cost savings, they are gaining students and hiring state-certified teachers to maintain a great education for their students (ConnectionsAcademy1, 2010 April 27).
- Connections Academy charter schools are public schools that are publicly funded—parents don't pay tuition and often computers and supplies are also provided free of charge (ConnectionsAcademy1, 2011 May 12).

Real Graduation and Beyond

- Connections Academy provides a cap and gown graduation ceremony where graduating high school students and their teachers meet and celebrate together (ConnectionsAcademy1, 2011 June 20; connectionsacademy, 2012 June 28).
- In 2012 Oregon graduates of Connections Academy were offered \$300,000 worth of scholarships to universities around the country. <http://youtu.be/4uIPJShj9vY>(connectionsacademy, 2012 June 28).

Satisfaction Ratings and Consumer Outreach

- Connections Academy conducts surveys of parents that utilize its schools and has a [93-96% satisfaction ratings](#) across multiple variables (Connections Academy, 2012d).
- Interested parents can [connect directly](#) with existing parents at any Connections Academy school to learn about the school first hand (Connections Academy, 2012a).
- A useful and comprehensive [FAQ](#) is offered (Connections Academy, 2012c).
- Parents and students can check a [national map](#) to see whether a Connections Academy exists in their state (Connections Academy, 2012b).

Conclusion

- Connections Academy offers effective K-12 education in fulltime virtual public schools in many states and districts. Parent satisfaction scores, flexibility, top-shelf curriculum and instruction, effective business practices, learner-centered approach, and other good practices make it a model for online virtual schools. Connections Academy is a great example of the current achievements and future potential of online virtual education in K-12 setting.

References

Campbell, M. (2012). The end of school as we know it. *New Scientist*, 215(2881), 6.

Connections Academy. (2012a). Connect with a connections academy parent. *Connections Academy (Baltimore, MD)*. Retrieved from <http://www.connectionsacademy.com/our-program/school-community/contact-a-parent.aspx>

Connections Academy. (2012b). Find a Connections Academy online school. *Connections Academy (Baltimore, MD)*. Retrieved from <http://www.connectionsacademy.com/check-availability.aspx>

Connections Academy. (2012c). Frequently asked questions. *(Baltimore, MD)*. Retrieved from <http://www.connectionsacademy.com/our-program/faqs.aspx>

Connections Academy. (2012d). Parent testimonials. *Connections Academy (Baltimore, MD)*. Retrieved from <http://www.connectionsacademy.com/our-program/parent-comments.aspx>

Connections Academy. (2012e). Specialty academies for exceptional talents. *Connections Academy (Baltimore, MD)*. Retrieved from <http://www.connectionsacademy.com/our-program/specialty-programs.aspx>

References

- Connectionsacademy. (2011, Sept 7). Miranda Hashemi – Cyber school meets the need of aspiring ballerina. [Video file]. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=plpp&v=y1pjH5QIJSU>
- Connectionsacademy. (2011, Apr 12). Online Public School: Thriving in a Safe Learning Environment. [Video file]. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=plpp&v=gX2wnUcnS1I>
- Connectionsacademy. (2011, May 17). Overcoming Health Issues with Online School. [Video file]. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=plpp&v=65Gom9OENu4>
- Connectionsacademy. (2012, Jun 28). Online high school graduation at Oregon Connections Academy. [Video file]. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=plpp&v=4ulPJShj9vY>
- Connectionsacademy . (2011, Sept 2). Online curriculum design for the virtual school classroom. [Video file]. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dYmv1dutLkE>
- Connectionsacademy. (2011, Oct 31). Student finds healthy option with online learning at Arizona Connections Academy. [Video file]. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=plpp&v=5Mc7kkXlfgM>

References

ConnectionsAcademy1. (2009, Oct 26). Online learning: Helping dreams become reality for competitive athletes. [Video file].

Retrieved from http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=plcp&v=AY30ZgTL1_c

ConnectionsAcademy1. (2010, Jan 12). Learn about Colorado Connections Academy from students, parents, and teachers. [Video

file]. Retrieved from http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=plcp&v=fl1XYV4_8sl

ConnectionsAcademy1. (2010, Apr 27). Learn about Capistrano Connections Academy. [Video file]. Retrieved from

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=plcp&v=d51RgUAWNXs>

ConnectionsAcademy1. (2010, Sep 8). Online Learning in Nevada - Online Public School. [Video file]. Retrieved from

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=plcp&v=Ql5Jp5x0iFU>

ConnectionsAcademy1. (2011, Mar 25a). Art clubs at Connections Academy online school. [Video file]. Retrieved from

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=plcp&v=2TP-pxdNo3c>

ConnectionsAcademy1. (2011, Mar 25b). Chess clubs at Connections Academy. [Video file]. Retrieved from

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=plcp&v=hCqPrCBpYFY>

References

ConnectionsAcademy1. (2011, Mar 25c). Extracurricular activities and online Learning. [Video file]. Retrieved from

http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=plcp&v=R_8oGxfyRdc

ConnectionsAcademy1. (2011, April 1a). Robotics club: Extracurricular activities and online learning. [Video file]. Retrieved from

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=plcp&v=g-Zux29jl-c>

ConnectionsAcademy1. (2011, April 1b). What about socialization? Making a difference outside the online learning classroom.

[Video file]. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=plcp&v=F8OXXW88WnY>

ConnectionsAcademy1. (2011, May 5a). New virtual school in Utah - Connections Academy. [Video file]. Retrieved from

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=plcp&v=VenDrbCwRkU>

ConnectionsAcademy1. (2011, May 5b). Online school welcomes NV governor – Read across America day. [Video file]. Retrieved

from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=plcp&v=Y95OVezy2R4>

ConnectionsAcademy1. (2011, Mar 25c). Extracurricular activities and online Learning. [Video file]. Retrieved from

http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=plcp&v=R_8oGxfyRdc

References

ConnectionsAcademy1. (2011, April 1a). Robotics club: Extracurricular activities and online learning. [Video file]. Retrieved from

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=plcp&v=g-Zux29jl-c>

ConnectionsAcademy1. (2011, April 1b). What about socialization? Making a difference outside the online learning classroom.

[Video file]. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=plcp&v=F8OXXW88WnY>

ConnectionsAcademy1. (2011, May 5a). New virtual school in Utah - Connections Academy. [Video file]. Retrieved from

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=plcp&v=VenDrbCwRkU>

ConnectionsAcademy1. (2011, May 5b). Online school welcomes NV governor – Read across America day. [Video file]. Retrieved

from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=plcp&v=Y95OVezy2R4>

ConnectionsAcademy1. (2011, May 12). Online learning with Ohio Connections Academy. [Video file]. Retrieved from

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=plcp&v=VH0Ue8c-Fk0>

ConnectionsAcademy1. (2011, May 13). Online summer school for grades K-12: Credit recovery, enrichment. [Video file].

Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=plcp&v=L3kRrXTd2zs>

References

- ConnectionsAcademy1. (2011, June 20). On the set of Bucket & Skinner with online high school graduate Ashley Argota. [Video file]. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=plcp&v=Go1Sno9Wdni>
- ConnectionsAcademy1. (2011, June 22). Virtual school in Nevada - Parents love schedule flexibility. [Video file]. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=plcp&v=ka3yW6Q- iw>
- ConnectionsAcademy1. (2011, June 28). MTS Minnesota connections academy: Virtual school helps academic all –star succeed. [Video file]. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=plcp&v=VeimpCC-s58>
- Davis, M. R. (2011). Cyber students taught the value of social skills. *Education Week*, 30(15), S8.
- Erdahl, K. (2012, April 13). More Indiana students trade in text books for computers. *WXIN-TV (Seattle, WA)*.
- Gustke, C. (2010). Virtual ed. biz seeks mainstream. *Education Week*, 29(36), 1,.
- Hogan, P. (2012, February 10). Net gain?. *Gazette, The (Cedar Rapids, IA)*.
- Jenkins, L. (2012). Just a national football powerhouse. *Sports Illustrated*, 117(8), 46.

References

Lindstrom, N. (2012, May 10). Independent students go viral. *Daily Press (Victorville, CA)*.

Lynott, J. (2011, April 30). Online students better connected. *Times Leader, The (Wilkes-Barre, PA)*.

Roller, W. (2010, April 11). Online school info session Tuesday. *Sun, The (Yuma, AZ)*.

National Sleep Foundation. (2011) Backgrounder: Later school start times. *National Sleep Foundation (Arlington, VA)*. Retrieved from <http://www.sleepfoundation.org/article/hot-topics/backgrounder-later-school-start-times>

Nevada Connections Academy. (2011). 2011-12: Our school at a glance. *Nevada Connections Academy (Sparks, NV)*. Retrieved from http://www.connectionsacademy.com/Libraries/School_Profile_PDFs/NCA_School_Profile_2011-12.pdf

Nevada Connections Academy. (2012a). Instructional tools bring learning to life. *Nevada Connections Academy (Baltimore, MD)*. Retrieved from <http://www.connectionsacademy.com/nevada-school/curriculum/instructional-tools.aspx>

Nevada Connections Academy. (2012b). Virtual school curriculum. *Nevada Connections Academy (Baltimore, MD)*. Retrieved from <http://www.connectionsacademy.com/nevada-school/curriculum/home.aspx>

References

Silary, T. (2012, August 28). West Catholic nixes opener against questionable opponent. *Philadelphia Daily News, The (PA)*.

Simba Information. (2011, June 27). Electronic education report. *Simba Information (Stamford, CT)*. Retrieved from
marketresearch.com

Wiser, M. (2012, February 21). Online schools pop up in Iowa. *Waterloo-Cedar Falls Courier (IA)*.

	100-90	89-80	79-70	<69	Total/100
Effective Introductory Statement	The introduction is focused, well-developed and states the main thesis with precision, and clearly previews the structure of the presentation	The introduction states the main topic and previews the structure of the essay, but the introduction may be a little vague in places or may only partially address the author's thesis or purpose.	The introduction states the main topic, but does not adequately preview the purpose of the structure. It may be unclear.	There is no clear introduction of the main topic or structure of the presentation.	/20
Sources	Student uses multiple sources that are current, including an interview. All sources used for quotes and facts are credible and cited correctly using APA Style in-text citations and references.	Student uses multiple sources that may not be current. All sources used for quotes and facts are credible and most are cited correctly using APA Style in-text citations and references.	Student relies on fewer than three sources that may not be current. Most sources used for quotes and facts are credible and cited correctly using APA Style in-text citations and references.	Student fails to select to use sources. Many sources used for quotes and facts are less than credible (suspect) and/or are not cited correctly.	/20
Focus on Topic	There is one clear, well-focused topic. Main idea stands out, is perceptive, and is supported by clear, convincing and detailed information.	Main idea is clear but the supporting information may be somewhat general or the essay may be more descriptive than analytic in spots.	Main idea is somewhat clear but there is a need for more supporting information.	The main idea is not clear. There is a seemingly random collection of information.	/20
Synthesis of Topic	The writer successfully describes the school's mission, organizational structure, regulatory environment, scope of offerings, and student body.	The writer adequately describe the school's mission, organizational structure, regulatory environment, scope of offerings, and student body	The writer describes the school's mission, organizational structure, regulatory environment, scope of offerings, and student body, but at a very base level.	The writer fails to successfully describe the school's mission, organizational structure, regulatory environment, scope of offerings, and student body	/20
Conclusion	Conclusion successfully packages the presentation	Conclusion packages the presentation but may be missing key details.	Student writes a conclusion that fails to summarize and package the presentation.	The writer fails to include a conclusion	/10
Writing, Spelling and Grammar	Presentation contains no mechanical errors	Presentation contains fewer than 3 mechanical errors	Presentation contains fewer than 6 mechanical errors	Presentation contains more than 5 mechanical errors	/10