

# AT ISSUE

March 2014 ■ Vol. 4 Issue 1

## Competency-Based Education: Closing the Completion Gap

### CREDITS

#### Contributing Writers:

Deborah Dawson

Jasmine Dean

Elise Johnson

Talia Koronkiewicz

#### Faculty Advisor:

Sandra J. Balkema, PhD

### *Why competency-based education?*

*Although competency-based education (CBE) may seem relatively new to postsecondary education, the concept has been widely discussed throughout American education since the 1990s (Jones & Voorhees, 2002; Mulder, Gulikers, Biemans, & Wesselink, 2009). In fact, colleges including Western Governors University, Sinclair Community College, and Kings College were pioneering CBE initiatives over a decade ago (2002). Several factors have focused current attention on CBE in higher education in recent years, including the demand for expanded access to education, the need to reduce the cost of postsecondary education, and a shift from traditional models for learning. Online learning technology, for example, which supports the notion of learning anytime, anyplace, anywhere, also requires higher education to adjust and rethink the traditional educational system.*



Doctorate in Community  
College Leadership

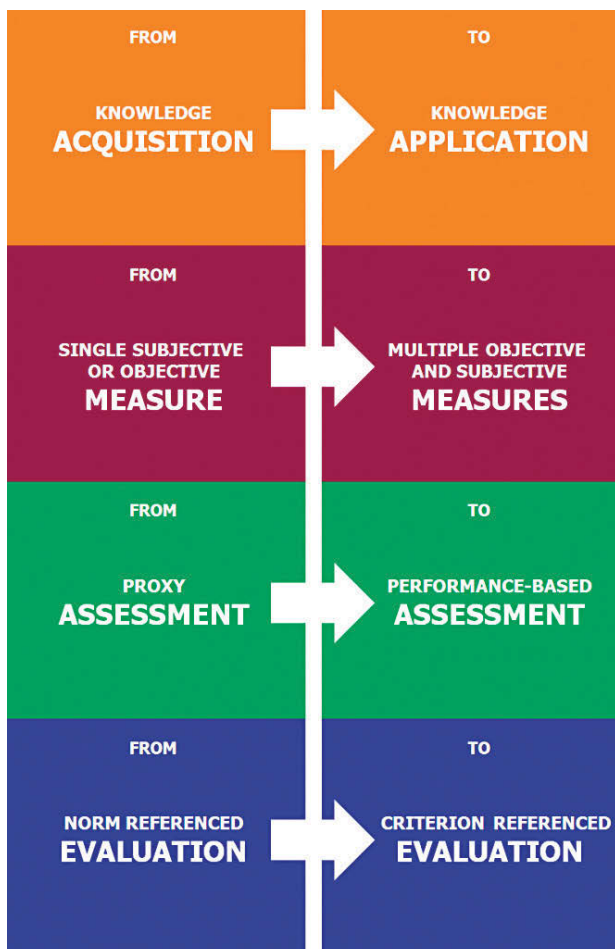


While the current Presidential administration is advocating a dramatic increase in the number of postsecondary certificates and degrees, there is currently a lack of clarity in regards to the value and consistency they provide (Ganzglass, Bird, & Prince, 2011). Furthermore, national pressure to ensure students pursuing postsecondary education graduate prepared for the global economy and the workforce has warranted higher education to consider competency-based education models. Workforce leaders, in particular, are pushing for an educational overhaul, stating,

“Educational credit based on competence, rather than on time, would result in a postsecondary credential that is portable, accepted by postsecondary institutions, and recognized across industry sectors” (2011, p. 2).

The Wingspread Group on Higher Education (as cited by Jones & Voorhees, 2002) noted that, “putting learning at the heart of the academic enterprise will mean overhauling the conceptual, procedural, curricular, and other architecture of postsecondary education on most campuses” (p. vii). Higher education must find a way to respond to the needs of diverse learners, as well as ensure students are gaining the necessary knowledge and skills to be successful in the workforce. Many in higher education see competency-based education as a possible solution to these current challenges.

**Figure 1:**  
Changing the Rules: Competency-Based Learning in Higher Education  
(Pearson: Research & Innovation Network)



### ***What is competency-based education?***

According to the U.S. Department of Education (n.d.), competency-based learning or personalized learning is a

structure that creates flexibility, allows students to progress as they demonstrate mastery of academic content, regardless of time, place, or pace of learning. Competency-based strategies provide flexibility in the way that credit can be earned or awarded, and provide students with personalized learning opportunities. These strategies include online and blended learning, dual enrollment and early college high schools, project-based and community-based learning, and credit recovery, among others. This type of learning leads to better student engagement because the content is relevant to each student and tailored to their unique needs. It also leads to better student outcomes because the pace of learning is customized to each student (para. 1).

As higher education looks to implement CBE initiatives, one of the first tasks is to develop a clear understanding of competency. Educational researchers have defined competency as “a combination of skills, abilities, and knowledge needed to perform a specific task” (Jones & Voorhees, 2002, p. 1). While many educational



*While they may support the concept of students mastering the required material, concerns lie in how this model impacts accreditation, financial aid, student grades, transcripts, faculty contracts, and credit transferability (Ashford, 2013).*

researchers see the value of CBEd's focus on clearly defined outcomes, others claim that in CBEd programs "the function of education is reduced to outcome oriented, technical procedures" (Chapman, 1999).

For those institutions that wish to incorporate aspects of CBEd, many are still trying to determine how to best implement CBEd practices. While they may support the concept of students mastering the required material, concerns lie in how this model impacts accreditation, financial aid, student grades, transcripts, faculty contracts, and credit transferability (Ashford, 2013). The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) is providing leadership with this initiative and is expected to release strategies to address moving forward with CBEd.

Sally Johnstone, Vice President of Academic Advancement at Western Governors University, described CBEd as essentially "flipping time and mastery" and providing "a platform that enables individualized learning" (Ashford, 2013, para. 3). CBEd necessitates that students master material but intends that they do so in a self-paced format. Educators agree that implementing CBEd initiatives will require higher education to re-think the traditional methods of teaching and learning and instead focus on students becoming proficient in a specific task.

### **What does competency-based education look like?**

A significant educational change in 2014, as noted by Selingo (2013), is that more colleges are changing from a model based upon how much time a student spends in class, to a system based on student knowledge. This system of CBEd is not new; however, it has evolved. Several decades ago, institutions such as Alverno College, Excelsior College, and Thomas Edison State College began assessing student competencies and issuing "credit for knowledge and skills they gained outside the traditional classroom" (Fain, 2013).

In 1997, Western Governors University (WGU), created as an online university, offered students college credit

for prior experiential learning but added a self-paced component to their degree offerings (Fain, 2013). Fain also notes that, in a CBEd model, students can work through their course material at their own speed through an automated system that uses faculty more as tutors than as lecturing professors. The cost of this type of education is significantly different than at a more traditional institution. According to Selingo (2014):

At Western Governors University, which has followed a competency-based model since it was founded in the late 1990s, 25,000 students pay just under \$3,000 a semester for as many courses as they can complete in a six-month period. The average student at Western Governors completes a bachelor's degree in about two and half years for a price tag in the neighborhood of \$15,000. That's about half the time it takes the typical student in traditional higher ed to get a bachelor's degree and half the price (para. 9).

This past year (Fain, 2013), universities have implemented yet another twist to this competency-based model – direct assessment. This approach "drops the credit-hour standard and completely severs the link between competencies and the amount of time students spend mastering them" (2013).

Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU) has recently received approval from the federal government and regional accrediting agencies for their direct assessment degree, better known as College for America. During his 2013 keynote address at WICHE Cooperative for Educational Technologies (WCET), Dr. Paul LeBlanc, President of SNHU, reaffirmed the importance of having affordable, assessable education. He also contended that a direct assessment degree offering is not a threat to traditional institutions, but instead offers an opportunity for working students to improve their lives. SNHU continues to offer their traditional on-campus experiences as well as continuing education coursework in addition to College for America's direct assessment associates degree in general studies. LeBlanc described the differences

*CBEd could be the method used to both validate noncredit coursework to employers and provide a national measure of accountability for noncredit across the U.S.*



in the approach they used for their direct assessment program based on several factors (summarized in Table 1), including time to completion, student- vs. faculty-centered, teaching model, and costs (2013).

LeBlanc also described the three Competency Clusters of the College for America: foundational skills, personal and social skills, and content knowledge (2013). These three clusters also form the foundation of the Lumina Degree Qualifications Profile (see Table 2).

As reported by Selinga (2013), the first graduate of College for America finished his associate degree in about 100 days. In this model, students pay a flat fee of \$1,250 for six months during which time they can fit in as many assessments as they can. As with the WGU model, competency-based (direct assessment) degrees can be less expensive than traditional degrees.

The University of Wisconsin System offers its “Flexible Option” plan offering a “respected degree or certificate” to working adults (UW website, n.d.). They have a similar self-paced, competency-based (direct assessment) model. Tuition is based on three month “subscription periods.” Students have the option of the “All-You-Can-Learn” plan for \$2,250. They can also choose a slower pace with the “Single-Competency-Set” for \$900 per period. UW “Flexible Options” offer bachelor’s degrees in nursing,

information science and technology, and associate of arts and sciences degree programs with assessments in biology, chemistry, mathematics, computer science, engineering, physics, psychology, health, exercise science and athletics, women’s studies, business, political science, philosophy, English, Spanish, geography, anthropology and sociology, history, art, and music (n.d.).

Each day, more universities join the list of those offering competency-based and direct-assessment options. Northern Arizona University and Brandman University, for example, offer similar models and degree options.

An organization just coming into existence is Competency-Based Education Network (C-BEN). According to Fain (2013), this group is funded for three years by the Lumina Foundation with Public Agenda coordinating the work. Up to twenty institutions will be included in this group. Fain notes that the group’s goals are to share intelligence and to review best practices with the intent to influence national discussion. Fain reports that C-BEN will focus on the details of building a new program that includes designing sound assessments, compliance with financial aid policies, and enhancing business processes and information technology systems. Information developed by C-BEN will be made available to the public.

**Table 1.**  
**Comparison of Traditional Model vs. SNHU College for America Direct Assessment Model**

Current State	College for America
Time fixed, Learning undefined	Time variable, Learning defined
Faculty centered	Student centered
Expert teaching model	Mentor model
High cost/price	Drive costs out of model
Transcript black box	Proof of learning
“Big chunk” courses	Granular competencies
Learners come to institution	Learning comes to students

Adapted from LeBlanc (2013)





**How does competency-based education apply to workforce development?**

At the current time, CBEd appears to be most comfortable and most easily applied in workforce development and noncredit training settings. Currently 1,132 two-year public colleges in the United States serve 6,596,356 students in for-credit programs plus an estimated 5,000,000 students in noncredit continuing education courses (2009, p. 1). Considering the performance measures of community colleges are based solely on credit graduation and retention rates, the scope and value of almost half the educational activities community colleges deliver is greatly underestimated (2009, p. 13).

Noncredit activities include most of the skill building, literacy, college readiness, workforce development, and customized business training courses (Business Roundtable, 2009, p. 4). A report on noncredit enrollment published by the American Association of Community Colleges provides recommendations to advance public support of noncredit education. One of these recommendations supports the development of standard systems to record outcomes that promote “portable evidence of skills” for students (2009). Using CBEd to standardize noncredit outcomes would provide common outcomes across community colleges providing noncredit students with portable stackable credentials.

According to a recent report from the Corporation for a Skilled Workforce, the U.S. desperately needs a more

coherent competency-based credentialing system, to ensure that businesses and job seekers get the most out of postsecondary training (Corporation for a Skilled Workforce, 2013, p. 3). Dan Phelan, President of Jackson College, calls the work to develop CBEd models “important and urgent” and states the AACC’s strategies to implement the recommendations of the 21st Century report will address the need to offer CBEd as a way to provide stackable credentials with real market value (Ashford, 2013, p. 1). CBEd could be the method used to both validate noncredit coursework to employers and provide a national measure of accountability for noncredit across the U.S.

**What are some of the issues related to competency-based education?**

CBEd in higher education has its skeptics. In her article “Experience Matters: Why Competency-Based Education Will Not Replace Seat Time,” Johann Neem finds CBEd will not work in the liberal arts and sciences. She concludes that CBEd only “[M]akes sense for those vocational fields in which knowing the material is the only important outcome, where the skills are easily identified, and where the primary goal is certification” (Neem, 2013, p. 26). Noncredit coursework is founded on the theory that students are seeking to achieve specific outcomes and thus meets the criteria appropriate for CBEd established by Neem. Noncredit students are typically preparing for exams to enter higher-level courses, or are sponsored by their employers to learn job specific

**Table 2.**  
**Competency Clusters: College for America**

Foundational Skills	Personal and Social Skills	Content Knowledge
Communication skills	Personal effectiveness	Business essentials
Critical and creative thinking quantitative skills	Ethics and social responsibility	Science, society, and culture
Digital fluency and information literacy	Teamwork and collaboration	

Adapted from LeBlanc (2013)



skills, or gaining the knowledge needed to pass industry certification exams.

Implementing CBEd as a benchmark for community college's noncredit activities could provide noncredit students with portable stackable credentials and deliver a means to measure the performance of these programs allowing community colleges to receive recognition for the five million noncredit students they serve each year. Many educators feel that as we initiate integrating CBEd into community colleges, it may be advisable to begin in the noncredit arena.

While CBEd seems to have some promising advantages in several arenas, higher education institutions wishing to integrate CBEd options have identified these additional issues and challenges (Klein-Collins, 2013):

- Establishing federal financial aid eligibility
- Building faculty support
- Identifying principles of good practice
- Managing expectations about degree completion
- Developing a common language or narrative for communication purposes
- Working with regional accrediting bodies
- Gaining a better understanding of the kinds of assessments being used
- Identifying standard data collection needs so that off-the-shelf back office systems might be developed

Of particular concern is the credit hour measure of awarding federal financial aid. Recent policy exists (Bergeron, 2013) regarding Title IV Approval for CBEd (or direct assessment programs), but this may take time to decipher. Many educators agree that, because of the confusion surrounding federal financial aid eligibility for CBEd programs, this is one of the first issues that must be resolved (Klein-Collins, 2013). Since most community college students rely on federal financial aid to pay for tuition and related costs, clear financial aid guidelines

must be in place at the federal and institutional levels so that students are aware of which programs are financial aid eligible. If CBEd programs are offered, students need upfront information regarding costs, financial aid eligibility, and other funding options. These guidelines should also clarify how federal financial aid funds for CBEd programs will be awarded: for the entire course of the program through completion, by assessment completion, by time enrolled, or by other criteria. Institutions must ensure that clarification is made prior to offering CBEd programs to avoid ambiguity.

### ***What's next for CBEd in community colleges?***

If these challenges can be addressed and resolved, CBEd could help community colleges close the completion gap by "ensuring more students complete credentials in less time, at lower cost, with a focus on real learning that leads to greater employability" (Pearson, n.d.). With well-defined competencies, graduates will have attained skills that are aligned with 21st century careers, increasing the likelihood of employment without decreasing rigor and relevance (n.d.). As the nation moves towards more stringent college and career-ready standards, CBEd will continue to gain ground in the K-12 school system (Pace, 2013), a result that higher education institutions clearly cannot ignore.

It will be challenging for community college students, faculty, and administrators to embrace the cultural shift needed to implement CBEd. The traditional teaching and learning methods would cease to exist in many classrooms, and creating new methods of support for students could tax even the seasoned student affairs professionals. However, the potential gains for community colleges and particularly for students should be considered. The completion agenda warrants innovative strategies and demands increased completion rates; CBEd could just be a part of the solution.





## References

- Ashford, E. (2013, November, 18). New courses stress competency to meet workforce needs. *Community College Daily*. Retrieved from <http://www.ccdaily.com/Pages/Workforce-Development/New-courses-stress-competency-to-meet-workforce-needs.aspx>
- Bergeron, D.A. (2013, March 19). Applying for Title IV eligibility for direct assessment (competency-based) programs. Letter to IFAP members. United States Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education. Retrieved from <http://ifap.ed.gov/dpccletters/GEN1310.html>
- Business Roundtable. (2009). *Counting the hidden assets: First steps in assessing the impact of community college noncredit education programs on the workforce and local economies*. Retrieved from [http://businessroundtable.org/uploads/studies-reports/downloads/200912\\_Counting\\_the\\_Hidden\\_AssetsFINAL\\_\\_1.pdf](http://businessroundtable.org/uploads/studies-reports/downloads/200912_Counting_the_Hidden_AssetsFINAL__1.pdf)
- Chapman, H. (1999). Some important limitations of competency-based education with respect to nurse education: An Australian Perspective. *Nurse Education Today*, 19(2): pp. 129-135.
- Corporation for a Skilled Workforce. (2013). *Making a market for competency-based credentials*. Retrieved from <http://www.skilledwork.org/sites/default/files/MakingAMarketforCompetency-BasedCredentials.pdf>
- Fain, P. (2013, December 12). Competent at what? *Inside Higher Ed*. Retrieved from <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2013/12/12/lumina-funded-group-seeks-lead-conversation-competency-based-education#ixzz2rWISmBMj>
- Ganzglass, E., Bird, K., & Prince, H. (2011). *Giving credit where credit is due: Creating a competency-based qualifications framework for postsecondary education and training*. Retrieved from Center for Law and Social Policy, Inc.: [www.clasp.org](http://www.clasp.org)
- Hitchcock, T.A. (2013, Feb. 13). Changing the rules: Competency based learning in higher education. NextGen Learning & Assessment. Pearson: Research & Innovation Network. Retrieved from <http://researchnetwork.pearson.com/nextgen-learning-and-assessment/changing-the-rules-competency-based-learning-in-higher-education#sthash.3ZeAF4Rj.dpuf>
- Jones, E. A., & Voorhees, R. A. (2002). Defining and assessing learning: Exploring competency-based initiatives. Report of the national postsecondary education cooperative working group on competency based initiatives in postsecondary education. Retrieved from National Postsecondary Education Cooperative: <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2002/2002159.pdf>
- Klein-Collins, R. (2013, November). Sharpening our focus on learning: The rise of competency-based approaches to degree completion. (Occasional Paper No. 20). Urbana, IL: University of Illinois and Indiana University, National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment.
- LeBlanc, P. (2013, November 14). Opening Keynote. 2013 WCET Connect Conference. Denver, CO. Retrieved from <http://events.mediasite.com/Mediasite/Play/8ed71a2b8a1142948f7c43f39c90f0f61d?catalog=8d5f3edf-93f7-469e-962e-dd26638c1b4b>
- Mulder, M., Gulikers, J., Biemans, H., & Wesselink, R. (2009). The new competence concept in higher education: error or enrichment? *Journal of European Industrial Training*, 33(8/9), 755-770. Retrieved from [www.emeraldinsight.com/0309-0590.htm](http://www.emeraldinsight.com/0309-0590.htm)
- Neem, J. N. (2013, Fall). Experience matters: Why competency-based education will not replace seat time. *Liberal Education*, 99(4), 26-29. Retrieved from <http://aacu.org/liberaleducation/le-fa13/neem.cfm>
- Pace, L. (2013, April 25). An emerging Federal role for competency education. *Competency Education Series: Policy Brief One*. KnowledgeWorks. Retrieved from <http://www.knowledgeworks.org/sites/default/files/Competency-Education-Series%20-Policy-Brief-One.pdf>
- Pearson Learning Solutions. (n.d.). Putting students first: The case for competency-based learning. *Always Learning series*. Retrieved from: <http://www.pearsonlearningsolutions.com/assets/downloads/pdfs/competency-based-learning.pdf>
- Selingo, J. (2013, December 10). Big idea 2014: Base degrees on what we know, not how long we spent in a classroom. LinkedIn. Retrieved from <http://www.linkedin.com/today/post/article/20131210000347-17000124-big-idea-2014-base-degrees-on-what-we-know-not-how-long-we-spent-in-a-classroom?trk=eml-mktg-inf-m-bigidea-1210-p3>
- U.S. Department of Education (n.d.). *Competency-based learning or personalized learning*. Retrieved from <http://www.ed.gov/oii-news/competency-based-learning-or-personalized-learning>
- University of Wisconsin (n.d.). UW flexible option faq. Retrieved from <http://flex.wisconsin.edu/faqs/#selfpaced>
- Van Noy, M., Jacobs, J., Korey, S., Bailey, T., & Hughes, K. L. (2008). *Noncredit enrollment in workforce education: State policies and community college practices*. Retrieved from American Association of Community Colleges website: <http://www.aacc.nche.edu/Publications/Reports/Documents/noncredit.pdf>



FERRIS STATE  
UNIVERSITY

Doctorate in Community  
College Leadership

**Ferris.edu/CCLeadership ■ (231) 591-2710**

Writings and opinions stated in this publication  
do not reflect the opinions of Ferris State University.