

Perspectives

Community College
Leadership for the
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Higher Education is Dead, Long Live Higher Education

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HIGHER EDUCATION IS IN TRANSITION – one as significant as when Gutenberg’s printing press hastened the transition from a world based on oral communication to one based on the written word. Consider the following challenges higher education faces:

- ▲ Public funding for higher education provides less than half of what it did at its height in the 1980s¹.
- ▲ College tuition and fees increased 600% since 1980, much faster than real household income, inflation, and healthcare costs².
- ▲ 70% of people with high school degrees (or equivalent) seek post-secondary education opportunities, up from less than 40% just a generation ago. The total number of people seeking higher education soon will hit 20 million³.
- ▲ 85% of higher-education seekers are older than 24, attending part time, seeking a degree other than a baccalaureate, and not living in or around a residential university⁴. Yet we continue to wedge the majority of students, the so-called “nontraditionals,” into inflexible educational structures that were built for 18-22 year olds and that have changed very little in almost a millennium.
- ▲ Students and faculty have equal access to today’s “Google world” of ubiquitous information, shifting educational needs from information access to information evaluation, information application to solve complex problems, and creation of new knowledge.

Some say that higher education is dead⁵, the next “bubble” about to burst. At the very least, it’s an enterprise ripe for disruption⁶.

Enter Competency-Based Education

Competency-based education (CBE) in higher education has been in existence for at least 40 years, as evidenced by the ability-based curriculum of Alverno College⁷. The main characteristic of CBE is a curriculum that requires students to demonstrate learning outcomes (competencies).

One type of CBE that’s hailed as a true disruptor in higher education is direct assessment (DA)⁸. In DA-CBE, students progress toward degrees not through structured courses or accumulated credits, but by demonstrating mastery over the competencies defining that degree⁹. To move on, students must pass assessments at a “mastery level.” Students prepare themselves as they like and at their own pace. If they don’t achieve mastery the first time, they can take the assessment again. Instead

of learning being variable and time constant, in DA-CBE, learning is constant and time is variable.

The University of Wisconsin Flexible Option¹⁰ is among a handful of DA-CBE programs. UW Flex was conceived to bring higher education to people who have some college but no degree, and in areas most needed for economic and civic health. Bachelor’s degrees in nursing, IT, and diagnostic imaging, and a certificate in professional communications, are all available from UW-Milwaukee, with the Associate of Arts and Science (AAS) from UW Colleges. Following soon will be a bachelor’s in integrated studies from UW-Parkside, a master’s in GIS from UW-Stevens Point, and a certificate in alcohol and drug counseling from UW-Madison.

In DA-CBE, learning is constant and time is variable.

UW Flex is distinctive among current DA-CBE programs for two reasons:

1. Programs offered through UW Flex are degrees and certificates already offered by our UW institutions. For example, the AAS through UW Colleges uses
 - ▲ The same UW Colleges faculty and learning outcomes that define the brick-and-mortar AAS.
 - ▲ The same faculty who write the assessments, define what “mastery level” means for each competency, and evaluate students’ work.
 - ▲ The same university governance policies and processes approving the curriculum.
 - ▲ The same accrediting body that approves and accredits the degree.
2. The UW System participates in UW Flex through well-defined partnerships across UW institutions. While the degrees and certificates are each offered through individual institutions, all UW Flex programs receive operational and administrative support from UW-Extension, the outreach arm of UW System.

One criticism of DA-CBE is that education is reduced to test taking. We deftly address issues of quality and curricular integrity by working within our UW institutions and with our “regular” faculty and staff. Because UW faculty dictate that critical thinking, complex problem solving, and knowing about oneself and the world are essential learning outcomes for UW-educated students, these activities are embedded in our degrees and certificates,

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One way that some postsecondary institutions are innovating is by focusing more on what students learn, rather than where or how long the learning takes place.

- Rebecca Klein-Collins and Elizabeth Baylor

While it can be a tactic or a tool to improve teaching and student learning, CBE’s greatest strength is that it provides a means for helping quality and affordability co-exist in higher education.

- Sally M. Johnstone and Louis Soares

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EMERGING LEADERS' PERSPECTIVES

Competency-based education (CBE) methodologies are designed to improve the quality of higher education by putting the focus squarely on demonstrated learning outcomes, thus shifting the historic emphasis on seat time and credit hours to the mastery of learning outcomes and achievements of capabilities. However, launching CBE requires a significant shift in organizational processes. We posed the following question to emerging and national leaders; their answers appear below.

Lisa Webb Sharpe, M.B.A.

Senior Vice President, Lansing Community College
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Competency-based education is compelling and pragmatic in its assurances that students achieve mastery of knowledge and skills in their chosen discipline. The flexibility afforded students to move as quickly as they are able through courses/units, no matter their source of knowledge, may appeal to a broader array of students. Leaders should consider the following factors:

Internal Considerations

Faculty engagement and acceptance are critical and fundamentally key elements in a successful CBE model. Faculty members become facilitators, coaches, and mentors, hyper-focused on student learning. Partnering with businesses, faculty redesign courses and curricula causing learning outcomes to evolve into measureable competencies. Union and/or senate support becomes crucial as well.

Students' learning must be measureable, relevant to the labor market, and transferable to other sources; it should also be personalized, rich in learning resources, and variable in time to completion.

Infrastructure support that enables variable entry and exit is required. It should provide secure technology to support electronic admission, registration, advising, counseling, coaching, learning, and assessment. Also, it should offer open source and high quality learning resources.

External Considerations

Accrediting bodies will require that institutions demonstrate rigor and learning outcomes that meet quality standards that equal or exceed traditional academic programs currently measured in seat-time units.

Financial aid (Title IV) eligibility is integral to students' access to post-secondary credential attainment. However, even though supported by other criteria, eligibility is grounded in participation measured in seat-time units - the accumulation of credit hours. Although important, seat-time does not truly measure learning. Title IV eligibility requirements have prompted most CBE programs to convert competency units into credit hour-equivalent units rather than clear this hurdle.

Business model optimization will depend on sound market analysis, coupled with a review of existing resources that may be encumbered versus creating separate start-up or stand-alone CBE programs.

Transfer of competency units to other colleges will require transcripts be translated into credit hours until CBE is more broadly accepted. Also, employers' needs should be embedded into competencies to ensure market relevance.

Proceed thoughtfully, but without delay.

QUESTION OF THE MONTH:

As community college leaders, what are some of the first factors we should consider when developing a CBE methodology?

Debbie Dawson, M.S.E.E., P. E.

Director, Ferris State University
Big Rapids, Michigan

Competency based education (CBE) programs can offer institutions a new way of organizing student learning. However, adoption of this type of model is not a quick or easy process. Awarding credentials for mastered competencies requires new infrastructure, new approaches to teaching and learning, and new tools to deliver content and assess skills, abilities, and knowledge.

A key question to consider: How does the institution develop a CBE program while maintaining or improving quality and academic rigor? Institutions have implemented competency frameworks in a variety of formats. Along the more traditional path, some use assessment for prior learning or portfolio review to award credit to students. Some develop a curriculum and individual lesson plans to fit a competency framework, then integrate assessments into the regular credit-based courses. The emerging trend in CBE, however, is performance based, where the students need only to successfully pass the institution's assessments in order to graduate. Setting clear expectations while defining roles and responsibilities for overseeing academic quality through a robust assessment process is one of the first considerations an institution needs to make to ensure student learning is a priority for any type of CBE program.

Institutions looking to be a part of this evolutionary initiative must be able to develop CBE models that reflect valid and robust competencies.

Faculty in CBE programs are faced with the need to develop non-traditional teaching and assessment techniques. They become learning facilitators in place of lecturers. Immediate feedback is used to encourage students to continue to practice and learn difficult concepts and skills until they are able to master them. Educators must be able to respond rapidly to support students when needed. Enhanced technology using predictive analytic tools will help facilitate faculty/student interaction and are necessary for successful CBE programs.

The shift to acceptance of CBE is happening quickly. Institutions looking to be a part of this evolutionary initiative must be able to develop CBE models that reflect valid and robust competencies; flexible and supported programming; effective learning resources; assessments that are secure and reliable; and most importantly, committed faculty, staff, and administration.

Lisa Webb Sharpe is Senior Vice President of Finance, Administration and Advancement at Lansing Community College. Her public service career also includes leadership roles as Director of the Michigan Department of Management and Budget, and service as a cabinet official in municipal government. She earned an MBA from Wayne State University. As a Ferris State University DCCL student, she is working to understand how competency-based education can be applied more broadly at her institution.



Debbie Dawson, P.E., is Director of the School of Engineering and Computing Technology at Ferris State University. She held several engineering and management positions before moving into academia, first as an Electrical and Computer Engineering instructor at Western Michigan University, then as Dean of Business and Advanced Technology at Kalamazoo Valley Community College. She holds the M.S.E.E. degree from Rochester Institute of Technology and is currently enrolled in the DCCL program at Ferris State University.



NATIONAL LEADER PERSPECTIVE

Competency-based education (CBE) methodologies are designed to improve the quality of higher education by putting the focus squarely on demonstrated learning outcomes, thus shifting the historic emphasis on seat time and credit hours to the mastery of learning outcomes and achievements of capabilities. However, launching CBE requires a significant shift in organizational processes. We posed the following question to emerging and national leaders; their answers appear below.

Back to Our Future: The Opportunity for Pure Learning

Allen Goben, Ed.D.

Commissioner
AACC 21st Century Commission on the Future of
Community Colleges

Peter Drucker said, "The best way to predict the future is to create it." Amidst unprecedented societal change, early 21st Century educators have an equally unparalleled opportunity to create a future honoring past success while expanding future capabilities. For faculty and administrators, this means that together, we must implement the current success agenda to further our time-honored mission of access and excellence. Emerging opportunities include Competency-Based Education (CBE). There are three major factors college leaders must consider when developing their CBE approach.

...As modern educators refine competencies and learning outcomes definitions, we find that outcomes contributing to the magical, transformational moments we relish can be documented.

First, we need to understand the history. Competency-based approaches are not new. In fact, modern efforts have been around for decades and earlier approaches for millennia. Liberal arts CBE efforts are more recent. I recall 1990's training as a history teacher regarding "Outcomes-Based Education." OBE was the dreaded acronym of the time enticing us to reinvent curriculum to clearly demonstrate learning outcomes. For some it was the beginning of a new journey; for others a continuation or maturation of prior efforts.

In many respects, it is an attempt to quantify something nearly unquantifiable. The magical moment of transformational learning defies definition. Just ask any faculty member who thrives on these moments. Or, ask any student who has experienced them as we all have. Transformational learning does not reside in a box or sit on a shelf to be observed and calculated. However, as modern educators refine competencies and learning outcomes definitions, we find that outcomes contributing to the magical, transformational moments we relish can be documented. It is a modern attempt to solve an age-old challenge, but it is not the current, fundamental standard that quantifies learning. That would be the credit hour.

Carnegie Foundation president Anthony Bryk explained, "The Carnegie Unit helped standardize course requirements. But it was never intended to measure the quality of teaching and learning, and it isn't well equipped to do so." It was created to provide a standard for teacher pensions. The Unit was opposed by faculty because it does little to measure learning, though it was eventually adopted and enculturated. It was considered an imperfect, temporary solution, but was never replaced as faculty assessed college readiness from disparate high schools and planned workloads.

QUESTION OF THE MONTH:

As community college leaders, what are some of the first factors we should consider when developing a CBE methodology?

Considering this backdrop, the second thing leaders must understand is that our talented faculty must fully engage and guide an agenda of progress including competency-based approaches for them to succeed. The credit hour structure functions because faculty eventually adopted it and found ways to make it work. Faculty members typically love to teach. Competency-based approaches, when not fully understood, might appear to diminish the teachers' role. This causes fear about job security and the value placed upon teaching itself. As faculty members delve deeper into CBE, many find that the faculty role is actually elevated in some respects. As students master competencies, they do not disappear or stop learning. They move on to more challenging material. Teachers give up some control of the procedural learning structure, but they gain an opportunity to engage in a myriad of momentous learning moments with students, rather than preparatory material leading to a few of those moments.

This leads us to the third major consideration, understanding that CBE is not the only or "always best" method. It is one approach in our arsenal to create magical learning moments of personal transformation. The delivery methods used to get there are becoming more varied, but traditional assessments such as tests, quizzes, papers, projects, portfolios, and so forth are still what measure learning.

With modern credentialing moving swiftly toward the use of badges and stackable certificates that make up degrees, most of us feel a bit uneasy as the ground moves beneath our feet. We can best predict the future, though, by creating it together. Perhaps we can collectively define learning outcomes... competencies... so well that stackable learning outcomes can lead to badges, certificates, and degrees mapped to careers and advanced degrees. What a fascinating challenge we have upon us to get back to our future, where CBE is used to allow faculty/student interaction, characterized by a steady diet of pure, transformational learning moments! I'll sign up for that class!

We can best predict the future, though, by creating it together...What a fascinating challenge we have upon us...

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With over 25 years of experience in education including six as a community college president, Dr. Allen Goben has been honored as a Distinguished Graduate at The University of Texas at Austin Community College Leadership Program and recently served as a Commissioner on the American Association of Community Colleges 21st Century Commission on the Future of Community Colleges. Dr. Goben's teams have enjoyed considerable success including a 24% improvement in student persistence, college-wide honors as one of the Chronicle of Higher Education's "Best Colleges to Work For," and statewide recognition as a "Best Place to Work."



QUICK TAKES Highlights from the Field

Competency-Based Degrees: Coming Soon to a Campus Near You by Joel Shapiro

The defining feature of competency-based education is that it places a priority on the assessment of defined learning outcomes, no matter where the learning occurs. CBE represents a significant departure from a classroom-based model and focuses on serving students in a more personalized fashion. This article explores the value of experiential learning and the logic of competency-based credit.

Read the complete study at:

<http://bit.ly/1jrtAv5>

7 Things You Should Know About Competency-Based Education by EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative (ELI)

Competency-based education (CBE) awards academic credit based on mastery of clearly defined competencies and replaces the conventional model in which time is fixed and learning is variable with a model in which the time is variable and the learning is fixed. The authors provide answers to seven fundamental questions about CBE most often posed by educators exploring this option.

Read the complete article at:

<http://bit.ly/1mOxBsA>

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whether students pursue them through traditional or UW Flex formats¹¹.

New Roles

The DA-CBE model transforms participants' lives:

- ▲ Faculty write competencies and assessments, evaluate students' work against standards for mastery, and provide feedback, but they do not teach, and there are no classrooms. The educational experience is more akin to faculty-guided independent study. Faculty direct an educational environment for UW Flex that is created by a team of educational experts: instructional designers who are expert at content delivery, tutors, librarians, and others who provide academic support, and the new role of academic engagement experts called Academic Success Coaches.
- ▲ The Academic Success Coach (ASC) role is defined by best practices of proactive and "wrap-around" support¹². The ASC discusses career goals with the student, provides guidance as the student develops an efficient individual learning plan, and provides feedback as the student prepares for assessments.
- ▲ The UW Flex student engages with faculty-designed learning modules to work toward mastery of competencies. The student chooses the pathway and pace to prepare for assessments and is supported in these efforts by the ASC, by feedback from the faculty, and by additional learning resources (curated content, tutoring, library support, etc.).

What's Next For Flex?

Challenges abound in a competency based model that is not tied to academic credit. UW Flex implementation has required us to build or modify student supports such as student services, accessibility services, and library services. Also affected are registrar functions, fees

A UW CBE Example

Norman Ramdohr wants to be in the driver's seat of his future. After years of fine-tuning vehicles for others, the Audi technician was ready to put his skills to use at a more advanced level. He's using the UW Flex Option program to jump-start the future he wants.

"This is about creating a path for some new options. It's about learning new skills and expanding my current ones," says Norman.

Norman started the Associate of Arts and Science degree program through UW Flex in February. He expects to complete in early 2016 and transfer to another UW program to earn a bachelor's degree in engineering, architecture or anthropology. The married father of two says flexibility, affordability, and control over his academic schedule all played a key role in pursuing his degree through UW Flex.

"You're not missing out on work and you become even more efficient with your time," he says. "For me, it means instead of making a 40-mile round-trip commute to Madison for class, that's time I can spend getting work, family, or school items taken care of. It's easier on the family, and you can't put a value on that aspect."

structures and collection, legal issues, veterans' benefits, and federal financial aid policies¹³.

Next steps focus on several initiatives:

- ▲ Creating a program of continuous improvement in curriculum and direct student service
- ▲ Developing student peer-to-peer support structures in this asynchronous educational environment
- ▲ Bringing in new degrees and certificates from UW partner institutions
- ▲ Supporting faculty and staff as they move UW Flex toward a fuller realization of a DA-CBE model
- ▲ Collaborating with the U.S. Department of Education to develop financial aid regulations that support students enrolled in DA-CBE programs
- ▲ Automating systems to build program capacity

Although UW Flex has enrolled students for only six months, we already see success serving students who had given up hope of completing their degrees, students working to advance in their jobs, and employers sending employees to engage in UW Flex (see sidebar example).

Our job is to support these students and help them reach their potential. Our nation deserves nothing less.

End Notes

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Kim Kostka, Ph.D., is Coordinator for the UW Colleges Flexible Option AAS Degree and Professor in the Department of Chemistry. She teaches chemistry at UW-Rock County, her home campus in Janesville, WI. As Coordinator, she supports faculty in design and delivery of competency-based curriculum and works with operations staff to implement the Flexible Option AAS Degree.



Greg Lampe, Ph.D., serves as UW Colleges Provost and Vice Chancellor for Academic and Student Affairs, having served the UW Colleges as an administrator since 2000. He has been recognized for his work as a scholar and teacher, receiving a number of teaching awards; his first book, *Frederick Douglass: Freedom's Voice, 1818-1845*, was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize in 1998.

