



President and Provost Roundtable Discussion

Topic: Competency-Based Education & Adaptive Learning

Summary: The Department of Education just announced the expansion of Title IV, Higher Education Act (HEA) program eligibility to include institutions with competency-based programs if the assessment is consistent with the institutions'/program's accreditation (Education, 2013).

Questions:

1. Can institutions of higher education separate teaching and credentialing?
2. Will the dominance of college degrees with accreditation be diluted by the movement toward competency-based education?

• Competency-Based Education: A Primer

- All direct assessment is competency-based, but not all competency-based is direct assessment.
- A competency is a clearly defined statement of the knowledge, ability, and/or skill that also includes assessment of the skill level and/or practical application of the knowledge, ability, and/or skill.
- Competency-based education focuses on an identifiable body of knowledge that's taught in a conventional unit of curriculum. It is outcomes-based with a focus on a student's ability to demonstrate mastery.
- Mastery is constant; time is variable.
- Potential Institutional Cost Factors:
 - Curriculum development
 - Assessment development
 - Instructional costs, including assessment evaluation
 - Institutional infrastructure, i.e. registrar, financial aid, IT
 - Student/academic support services (Davis)

• At Western Governors University (WGU), competency assessments take several forms including:

- Performance Assessments contain multiple tasks such as scored assignments, projects, essays, and research papers. Performance Assessments contain detailed instructions and rubrics for completing each assigned task and are usually submitted via TaskStream, an online project-management and grading tool.
- Objective Examinations are designed to evaluate knowledge and skills in a subject area. Most objective exams include multiple-choice items, multiple-selection items, matching, short-answer, drag-and-drop, and point-and-click item types, as well as case studies and video-based items.
- Essay Exams are used to measure students' ability to integrate and apply concepts. Essays are scored by outside graders against competency-based rubrics established by the faculty.
- Observations are used to measure teacher certification candidates' abilities to perform the skills acquired during their WGU studies. These classroom observations occur during the demonstration teaching experience and are conducted and evaluated by a trained local clinical supervisor (Carroll, 2013).

• Themes emerging from evaluation of CBE programs:

- Direct assessment of student learning is recognized by the Department of Education as an acceptable method to assess student learning. Direct assessment is being implemented in a variety of competency-based education degree programs around the country.
- Industry and faculty involvement in transforming the curriculum into the competency-based format is critical to a program's success. This is exemplified by Southern New Hampshire University's (SNHU) commitment to transparency and to conducting faculty workshops to communicate progress and to allow for greater faculty participation and feedback.
- SNHU's and WGU's competency-based programs took a year to develop. Great care was taken to ensure faculty and other stakeholders were involved in the process.
- Competency-based education varies greatly in its execution. SNHU and WGU created completely new methods to deliver and assess student competencies.

- As evidenced by WGU, competency-based education can change the way students interact with a university. These programs may require new positions within the university to serve students.
 - Both SNHU and WGU were able to deliver significant cost savings to students as a result of their programs.
 - Time to degree may be reduced by competency-based programs (Carroll, 2013).
- **Going Mainstream – Wisconsin:**
 - Wisconsin’s extension system will start a competency-based learning program called the “Flexible Option” later this year
 - Students with professional experience & training are able to test out of whole courses
 - First major, public university to have such a program (WGU and SNHU are both private institutions)
 - Targets those with some college but no degree to come finish and improve the workforce – specifically in the engineering, health-care and IT fields
 - Implementation Challenges:
 - Money spent on information systems to reflect new student progress
 - Success coaches – more involved than traditional advisor
 - How is mastery of a subject proven?
 - Wisconsin will not distinguish between traditional and flex degrees.
 - CBE is not a question of “either-or” when compared to traditional higher education. It merely provides more options in an evolving student pool (Carlson, 2013).
- **New Models in the Mix:**
 - CBE models bring
 - Personalization – in advising and instruction
 - Flexibility
 - Learning-centered progression
 - Focus on striving, older and working students
 - Austin Community College, THECB, SNHU, New Charter University, Northern Arizona University and Texas Southmost College all have larger scale CBE projects in progress or on future agendas
 - Need solid data from CBE programs and better tools to assess data
 - Need to determine which demographic is best suited for the CBE model (Milliron, 2013)
- **Comprehension is Not Equivalent to Competency:**
 - “Competency” models that do not work:
 - Narrow training programs – too focused on job skills and not knowledge and evidence-based reasoning
 - “One and done” approach – student passes a course that meets a competency requirement, and the requirement is complete, but is the student demonstrably competent?
 - “Coverage Is Enough” – Student reads course materials, takes a few tests (usually multiple choice/short answer), and passes the course
 - Writing, quantitative reasoning, analytic inquiry, and engaging diverse perspectives must be practiced frequently – it does not come from one course alone.
 - If competency is the goal, projects, papers, research, creative tasks and field-based assignments are key (Schneider, 2013).

References

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4. Milliron, M (2013, October). Learning how to bring new models into the mix. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, B12.
5. Schneider, C. (2013, October). The proof is in the portfolio. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, B14.
6. U.S. Department of Education (2013, March). Applying for Title IV Eligibility for Direct Assessment (Competency-Based) Programs. Retrieved from <http://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/education-department-releases-guidance-providing-title-iv-eligibility-competency>.