The Rise of Competency-Based Education

We've seen the statistics: the typical college student has changed. The majority of today's students are no longer fresh-faced high school graduates who enroll full-time and live on campus. They're older, more diverse, and have increasingly demanding responsibilities outside of school.

According to the U.S. Department of Education, only 28% of undergraduate students in the U.S. are under 21 years of age and attend four-year, non-profit schools. [1] That means the remaining 72% of students don't fit this traditional profile. They may be older, enrolled in a two-year program, attending a for-profit institution, or only learning part-time.

Nontraditional students are the new majority. We need to address their needs with an approach that will afford each and every one of them the best chance of success.

Why is this so important? Because we also know that attainment levels aren't where they need to be.

Recent statistics from the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce show that 65% of jobs in the U.S. will require some form of post-secondary education by 2020. [2] However, only 40% of working adults currently hold at least a two-year degree. [3] As it stands, we're simply not producing enough degree holders to support our future economy.

Competency-based education (CBE) is gaining popularity as a potential solution to this challenge. The CBE model offers students a way to earn their degrees faster, at a lower cost, and on their own time. Some have dismissed it as another "fad" built on empty promises to disrupt higher education, but I don't see it that way.

At its core, CBE is about leveraging good instructional design principles to serve learners better. A closer look at the model reveals elements that can all have an undeniable impact on student success. Allowing students to progress at their own pace, offering them continuous feedback, personalizing their learning experience, and giving them credit for the knowledge and skills they have previously attained are some of the examples.

Technology has a huge role to play in the success of a competency-based program. CBE itself isn't a new concept, but today's learning tools are making it easier to scale the principles it's built on. With that opportunity, we have a chance to make sure more of today's nontraditional students have the guidance and support they need to succeed.

It's a chance that we can't afford to miss.

John Baker
President & CEO
D2L

Introduction

Competency-based education (CBE) is taking off — and its impact extends throughout higher education. In CBE, students are evaluated and awarded credit and degrees not on seat time or by completing traditional courses, but based on their ability to demonstrate specific skills and competencies. For many students, this speeds up degree completion. And for adult students who have extensive work experience and knowledge gained outside the classroom, and are frequently unable to attend courses offered during traditional classroom hours, CBE can provide a way to earn degrees reflecting that experience and knowledge.

The articles in this compilation examine how more and more colleges are launching competency-based programs, the strategies they are adopting, and the regulatory challenges they face. Other articles look at how CBE raises questions about transcripts, the role of a professor and much more. Essays offer reflections on the issues from the perspective of administrators and faculty members.

Inside Higher Ed will continue to cover these issues, and welcomes your reactions to these articles and suggestions for future coverage.

--The Editors
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News

A selection of articles by *Inside Higher Ed* reporters

Measuring Competency

BY PAUL FAIN

Southern New Hampshire U's College for America releases a promising early snapshot of the general-education learning and skills of students who are enrolled in a new form of competency-based education.

A preliminary snapshot of the academic skills of students who are enrolled in a new, aggressive form of competency-based education is out, and the results – released in November 2015 -- look good.

Southern New Hampshire University used an outside testing firm to assess the learning and skills in areas typically stressed in general education that were achieved by a small group of students who are halfway through an associate degree program at the university's College for America, which offers online, self-paced, competency-based degrees that do not feature formal instruction and are completely untethered from the credit-hour standard.

The university was the first to get approval from the U.S. Depart-ment of Education and a regional accreditor for its direct-assessment degrees. A handful of other institutions have since followed suit. College for America enrolls about 3,000 students, most of whom are working adults. It offers associate degrees -- mostly in general studies with a concentration in business -- bachelor's degrees and undergraduate certificates.

To try to kick the tires in a public way, College for America used the Proficiency Profile from the Educational Testing Service. The relatively new test assesses students in core skill areas of critical thinking, reading, writing and mathematics. It also gives "context-based" subscores on student achievement in the humanities, social sciences and natural sciences. The results could be notable because skeptics of competency-based education fear the model might not result in adequate learning in these areas.

"We wanted to be able to have a way of examining where the students are," said Jerome L. Rekart, the program's director of research and analytics. He added that the program went with ETS for "external validation."

Colleges can benchmark their results on the Proficiency Profile against those from other institutions. ETS features comparative data based on results from 7,815 students at 27 associate degree-issuing institutions, representing a wide range of colleges, programs and students.

Matthew Soldner, a senior researcher in the higher education

practice at the American Institutes for Research, said the benchmark guide from ETS looked reasonable. (Soldner and AIR are working with a small group of institutions to gather early evidence about competency-based education's effectiveness.)

The overall results from College for America placed its group of students at the 67th percentile (see chart, below). The students scored at the top -- the 100th percentile -- in reading and the natural sciences. College for America also looked good on the measure of critical thinking. It only lagged behind average in mathematics, and not by much.

"The students did quite well," Rekart said. "It suggests we're pointed in the right direction."

Seeking Proof

College for America cautioned against reading too much into the results, which are based on a small sample from a program that was created less than three years ago.

"This really just scratches the surface of what our students are asked to do," said Rekart, noting that the college's academic programs are project based and that many of its students have not taken traditional examinations for years or even decades.

Even so, both critics and boosters of competen-

cy-based education are watching closely to see results from College for America and other direct-assessment programs. And Southern New Hampshire is eager to provide evidence about student achievement at its subsidiary. As Rekart said, the ETS comparison "speaks about transferability of the competencies."
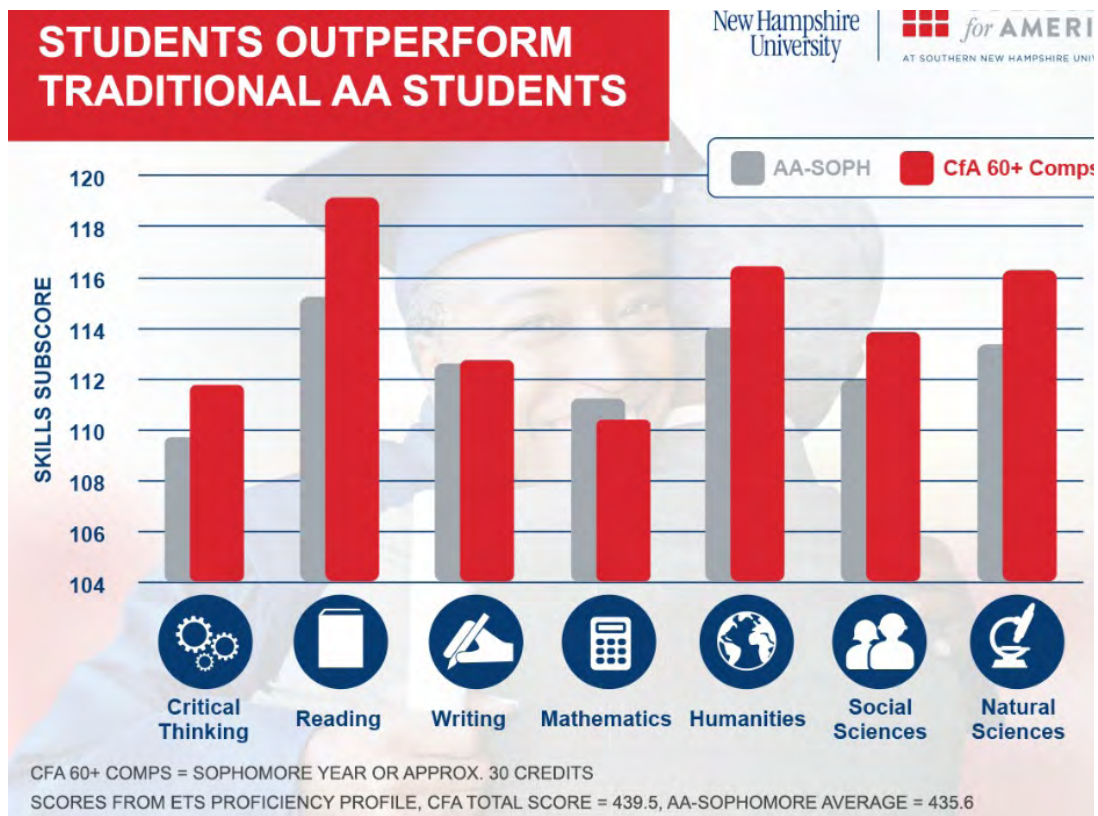
Amy Slaton, a professor in the department of history and politics at Drexel University, has written skeptically about the rise of competency-based education. She said the heavy workforce focus of some competency-based programs -- College for America relies on partnerships with employers as funnels for its enrollment -- makes it hard to glean much from benchmarking with traditional degree programs.

"This is not comparable," she said. "We're seeing a false equivalency."

For example, Slaton said, the lack of traditional grading in direct assessment changes the calculus for students' risk of failure. In a self-paced, self-directed environment, she said, students don't fail, they just keep muddling along.

"You see definitions of learning that have really been gutted," Slaton said. "That's not higher education."

Supporters of competency-based education, however, say their degree programs have the potential to be more rigorous. For example, a "gentleman's C" isn't possible in a competency-based program that requires mastery of a topic. If a student doesn't demonstrate that competency, he or she doesn't move forward.

STUDENTS OUTPERFORM TRADITIONAL AA STUDENTS

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AA-SOPH | CfA 60+ Comps

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CFA 60+ COMPS = SOPHOMORE YEAR OR APPROX. 30 CREDITS
SCORES FROM ETS PROFICIENCY PROFILE, CFA TOTAL SCORE = 439.5, AA-SOPHOMORE AVERAGE = 435.6

Either way, competency-based education programs face plenty of pressure to show evidence of student learning.

"Everybody wants it. Everybody needs it," said Alison Kadlec, senior vice president and director of higher education and workforce programs at Public Agenda.

And, as Soldner said, competency-based programs may have to clear a higher bar to gain accep-tance. So the good news for College for America is that its preliminary student outcomes appear similar to (and even a little better than) those of more traditional associate degree tracks.

"Traditional programs have had years, decades and centuries to refine their pedagogies," Soldner said in an email.

Given how new so many competency-based education programs are building from the ground up. Given how new so many competency-based education programs are, how reasonable is it to expect they'll dramatically outperform traditional programs?"

"The curious thing isn't that competency-based education programs are being challenged to show student learning outcomes; it is that an overwhelming number of traditional programs still aren't." ∎

Beyond the Transcript

By Paul Fain

Associations of registrars and student affairs administrators will work with eight colleges on prototypes for a new form of transcript -- a comprehensive record that includes learning outside the classroom.

Most people in higher education agree that the old-school college transcript fails to adequately capture what students learn and do during their time in college.

Student affairs administrators and college registrars often see the transcript's shortcomings in their jobs. So two national associations that represent those groups in July 2015 announced a project to develop models for a more comprehensive student record.

"The outcomes of a college experience are more than a degree," said Kevin Kruger, president of NASPA: Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education.

Lumina Foundation has kicked in $1.27 million for NASPA to partner with the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO) to explore how to collect, document and distribute information about student learning and "competencies," including what is gleaned outside of the traditional academic classroom.

While the field is nascent, said Mike Reilly, AACRAO's executive director, it's developing quickly. Reilly said the two associations hope to provide some guidance.

"There's a lot of innovation taking place," he said. "People are looking for examples right now."

Student knowledge that might be documented in next-generation transcript prototypes include co-curricular or experiential learning -- maybe working on a campus robotics team -- or even soft skills like critical thinking and good communication. Digital badges also could be included.

The current approach to transcripts "only tells a fraction of the story," said Cathy Sandeen, chan-

ELON EXPERIENCES TRANSCRIPT

cellor of the University of Wisconsin Colleges and Extension and a former vice president at the American Council on Education.

Sandeen welcomed the Lumina-funded project, saying that colleges need ways to "more granularly validate and acknowledge different components of learning."

The two associations will tap eight colleges to develop and test several models of a "comprehensive student record." They are avoiding the word "transcript," Kruger said, because whatever emerges will be broader than a list of courses and grades.

The project's leaders are accepting applications from colleges that want to participate. They plan to select institutions that represent higher education's breadth. The range of participants will include community colleges, minority-serving institu-tions and research universities.

No single take on a student record will emerge from the process, said Kruger.

"We're deliberately looking at a wide range of approaches," he said. "This is not going to be a one-size-fits-all model."

Yet the registrars and student affairs groups got involved in part to bring some standardization to the discussion.

For example, institutions like Elon University and Stanford University are considered by many to be pioneers in the field, having developed "extended" transcripts that include more than grades. Other colleges are getting into the game, often putting their own spin on transcripts.

Likewise, many colleges have created electronic portfolios to help students better explain their experience in college.

All the variation isn't a bad thing, Reilly and Kruger said. But it can create confusion on the receiving end.

For example, different colleges seek to transmit the information in different ways. Reilly joked that Stanford's technical sophistication with distributing extended transcripts is akin to sending one by "telepathy." Other colleges are more traditional. And employers have to make sense of it.

"If you have too many approaches," said Kruger, "it's hard for employers to know what's valuable."

Making Sense of Learning

The rise of competency-based education contributed to the project's creation.

Academic programs based on competencies -- a student's ability to demonstrate mastery of a learning goal -- can look different than a conventional grouping of courses into 120-credit degrees. That's particularly true of direct-assessment programs, which do not rely on the credit-hour standard.

Some of the roughly 300 colleges and universities that have created competency-based credentials, or are working on them, still "map" their transcripts to conventional course equivalents.

That means someone could have their demonstrated -- and required -- competencies in quantitative skills translated into a three-credit gateway math course equivalency. Likewise, competencies in business

essentials could map to a business 101 equivalency.

Others institutions, like Northern Arizona University, have created secondary, competency-based transcripts.

In either case, the registrars typically are the ones that get stuck with the brass tacks of converting competencies into the language of transcripts.

Reilly said traditional transcripts still have value, particularly for students who transfer to other institutions or apply to graduate school. "Academics generally know how to use that document," he said.

A comprehensive digital learning record, however, which a student could update throughout a lifetime, is a different animal. That approach has plenty of potential in the knowledge economy, said Reilly. He pointed to diploma supplements in the United Kingdom as an early example.

"This could really become the coin of the realm," Reilly said.

A separate Lumina-funded project will seek to create a web-based "credential registry." Researchers at George Washington University and Southern Illinois University at Carbondale will contribute to the registry, which is intended help users compare the quality and value of credentials, including college degrees and industry certifications.

Lumina also is pulling together a large number of higher education and other groups to create a shared language and a common framework for credentials.

Several vendors and nonprofits have done extensive work with digital repositories for student knowledge. Notable players include Parchment, the National Student Clearinghouse and Campus Labs. Related offerings include those from Merit Pages, Degreed and the Mozilla Foundation's Open Badges.

The new transcript project will tap some of those groups' expertise, Kruger said. Likewise, the work will draw heavily from the Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP), a Lumina-supported framework that seeks to determine what students should know and be able to do at the associate, bachelor's and master's degree levels. A revised version of the DQP emerged in draft form last year.

Reilly said faculty members will take a leadership role in working on the comprehensive transcript model from the eight participating institutions.

"We're going to be insistent that there's a faculty member represented," he said.

The goal is to create tools for colleges to demonstrate and articulate student learning, said Kruger, as well as authenticating and verifying that knowledge. He hopes employers will use the new forms of transcripts.

But even if they don't take off in the job market, Kruger said, the academy should benefit from the effort to translate lifelong learning into a student record.

Amy Laitinen, deputy director of New America's higher education program, applauded the project. Laitinen, a former White House and U.S. Education Department official who has criticized the credit-hour standard, said the new effort shows that mainstream higher education is getting more serious about the use of competencies and learning outcomes.

"Change is here," she said. "It's happening." ∎

Show, Not Tell

By Jacqueline Thomsen

A new graduate school of education will be competency-based. As demand for teachers increases and alternative preparation programs spread, this school hopes to stand out to the best aspiring educators.

Students expect their teachers to be prepared to lead, but sometimes that simply isn't the case.

With a wide variety of teacher preparation programs and an increasing demand for educators, alternative preparation options are springing up alongside existing traditional programs. And leaders at a new graduate school of education are hoping to make sure teachers are in the classroom as soon as they can prove they're ready.

The Woodrow Wilson Academy for Teaching and Learning, which the Woodrow Wilson Foundation in June 2015 announced that it will create, will be a competency-based program, letting students graduate as soon as they're deemed able to handle all of the school's main competencies. Rather than following the course work traditionally given to students in graduate classes, incoming students will be assessed on how well they can perform a task or demonstrate a skill. They will then be able to follow a customizable path of education and continue to be assessed until they are deemed ready for the classroom.

Arthur Levine, former president of Teachers College at Columbia University and president of the Woodrow Wilson Foundation, said the emphasis will be less on the amount of time potential teachers spend in graduate classes or credits earned, but rather on ensuring that teachers are ready to handle any number of scenarios.

To start, the school will prepare teachers in science, technology, engineering and math classes, which are fields Levine said he believes are understaffed throughout the country. The curriculum could expand to cover other subjects.

He said other graduate schools don't have the resources to try this kind of education, meaning the new program will serve as both an alternative option for those dedicated to becoming reputable teachers and a pool of research on effective teacher training methods.

"It's geared toward accomplishing one competency at a time," Levine said. "They go through the module according to how quickly they master those skills. It may take a short period of time or it may take a long time."

The school will work in partnership with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to conduct research on teacher and school leadership education. The new methods used in the school will serve as an opportunity to perform experiments and create new findings in a field of research some say lacks depth.

The research will be part of a new institute at MIT, called the MIT PK-12 Initiative, which will provide support to STEM teachers in all levels of K-12 education.

Currently, the Woodrow Wilson Foundation supports teaching fellows in five states. Levine said not only do their teachers stay in school systems for longer periods of time, but the students in classes led by the fellows also perform better than those taught by teachers who came from more traditional programs.

He described the new program as

being not a competitor, but a "public library" from which other schools could borrow lessons, all of which will be open source and available to the public.

"We want it to be replicated, but we don't want to replicate it ourselves," Levine said.

Alternative Approach

Alternative teacher preparation programs like the Woodrow Wilson Academy have seen a sharp rise in popularity over the past few years. Teach for America, which is selective and admitted more than 5,000 corps members in 2014, trains new teachers for up to 10 weeks over the summer before sending them out to some of the poorest parts of the country.

But some participants in programs like TFA use their time teaching only as a stepping-stone to determine what they actually want to do in life, rather than as an actual teacher prep program. Corps members are required to teach for only two years, and fewer than a third stay in the positions past that time period.

Levine said the Woodrow Wilson Academy will take in just 25 students during its first year, which is slated for 2017. Those students will have an opportunity to work with partner school districts on the North Shore and South Shore of Massachusetts, as well as in the greater Boston area.

While the class size may increase in future years, Levine said it will remain highly selective, and the high

bar for teaching candidates falls in line with recent research.

A new report from the American Institutes for Research (AIR) found that the more selective the program, the more likely that graduating teachers will remain in the profession and that students will be successful in the graduates' classrooms.

The report's author, Jenny DeMonte, a senior technical assistance consultant specializing in teacher preparation and licensure at AIR, said that while retention was low for teachers coming out of TFA, it was "concerning" how their students were more successful compared to students in classes with traditionally prepared teachers.

DeMonte said teacher preparation developed in a way that didn't necessarily account for the skills teachers would need to master in order to effectively run a classroom. However, DeMonte noted that the new school isn't exactly an original idea, given that competency-based education has been widely used in teacher preparation programs, although perhaps not on this level.

But more concerning to DeMonte is a potential lack of teachers. She estimates that the U.S. will need roughly 150,000 new teachers annually to keep up with demand, and each teacher needs to be properly trained to deal with any and all kinds of students.

"If you're a kid in school and you got the new teacher, you want to know for certain that he or she is

Arthur Levine

capable to lead a classroom on day one," she said.

Thorough teacher preparation can make a difference in terms of keeping teachers in schools and not losing them to other careers. DeMonte's report highlights the Urban Teacher Residency United Program in San Francisco, a program that accepts only about 11 percent of all applicants. After five years, 82 percent of the program's teachers were still working in the profession, a retention rate that is rarely seen in teaching.

A similar program, the Urban Teacher Center based in Baltimore and Washington, D.C., is only five years old, but has already proven itself to be successful, with schools frequently requesting that members of the institution work in their

classrooms.

Jennifer Green, CEO and founder of the Urban Teacher Center, said 95 percent of the course work given to teacher candidates is clinical, and all other readings are given to back up those practical experiences.

With more than 1,500 hours of clinical experience in urban classrooms, the program's graduates are quickly established as quality teachers, and are prepared to deal with students immediately.

Because the program works with urban schools, which Green identified as being in need of well-trained teachers more than other school districts, the teachers are prepared to handle most scenarios.

She said while the program will take longer to complete than TFA or other alternative programs, her center attracts students who are dedicated to becoming great teachers, not just teachers.

"The argument is, 'what kind of teacher do you want to be and how well do you want to serve students who deserve outstanding teachers?' " Green said. "If you're looking at teaching as a possible career or if you have a level of insight into education, then you'll understand that becoming a good teacher is an investment of your time and resources."

How will a completely competency-based program fit into the current field of teacher education? Proponents of traditional teacher preparation programs have defended their methods, saying it's impossible for a teacher to be successful without both clinical experience and a background in the methods and practice of teaching.

Rod Lucero, the vice president for member engagement and support at the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, said traditional programs encourage students to gain as much clinical practice outside of the program as possible, whether it's through tutoring or another way to become involved with K-12 students regularly. He noted that graduate schools also are adding more student teaching to the curriculum.

He said without understanding what it means to be a good teacher, Lucero said, it's going to be difficult for new teachers to comprehend exactly which skills they will need to master.

"Not every biologist is going to be a good biology teacher, not every psychologist is going to be a good psychology teacher," Lucero said. "It's in the pedagogy that quality teaching has, and that's what teacher preparation programs do well, what universities do well. And so alternative programs really don't do that part and it kind of goes to the mentality that anybody can teach."

But Levine doesn't believe anyone can teach.

Applicants for the Woodrow Wilson Foundation's teaching fellowships must go through days of interviews, simulations and other assessments to be accepted, and he believes a similar process will take place to be admitted to the new academy.

"We're really trying to get a sense of who these people are, and how well they perform as teachers," Levine said.   ∎

Cannibalizing or Complementing?

By Carl Straumsheim

The extension arm of the University of Wisconsin System is given degree-granting authority, but not all institutions in the system agree the change was necessary.

The University of Wisconsin is taking its experiments with competency-based education one step farther, giving its extension arm the authority to build and award degrees. At other institutions in the system, however, administrators aren't convinced the different format is enough to set the degrees apart from the programs they already offer.

UW-Extension has been around for more than a century, and its various responsibilities include applied research, continuing education and public broadcasting, among others. In 2013, it added competency-based education to that list. Known as the UW Flexible Option, the certificate and degree programs are aimed at adults who want to study on their own time and earn credit for prior knowledge.

The outreach arm has not been able to put its own name on those programs, however; UW-Extension has not had the authority to grant degrees. Its competency-based associate degree in arts and science offered in the Flexible Option format, for example, technically comes from the University of Wisconsin Colleges. That dependency on other institutions has made the development of competency-based programs slower than preferred, UW-Extension administrators said.

Cathy Sandeen

That changed in December 2015, when the system's Board of Regents approved a mission change. As soon as December 2016, UW-Extension hopes to offer its first competency-based degree: a bachelor of arts in business and management.

"This vote by the Board of Regents last week is really a vote for innovation in the UW System, giving us more flexibility to create our own degree programs more quickly and get them out there to students who need them," Cathy Sandeen, chancellor of UW Colleges and Extension, said in an interview with *Inside Higher Ed.*

Sandeen said the vote is an opportunity to create a new type of institution in the system, which consists of two research universities, 11 four-year universities, 13 two-year colleges and the outreach arm. The reworked UW-Extension will serve as a "safety valve," she said, contracting with other colleges and universities in the system to quickly assemble and disassemble competency-based degrees as they are needed.

Internal Competition or Expansion?

The expansion comes at a time when the system itself is contracting. A state budget plan passed earlier this year cuts $250 million from the system over two years, and individual campuses are absorbing their share. At the University of Wisconsin at Eau Claire, that means cutting

more than 150 positions. The UW Colleges will see a 30 percent reduction in administrative jobs.

The mission change has been met with mixed reception across the system. Those critical of the decision cited both philosophical and practical concerns.

For some, the clearest symbol of the change can be seen in UW-Extension's new mission statement. The outreach arm no longer serves "all Wisconsin people," but "people of Wisconsin and beyond." Critics say the revised mission clashes with the Wisconsin Idea, the belief that the university system should focus on the state and its residents.

Noel T. Radomski, director and associate researcher of the Wisconsin Center for the Advancement of Postsecondary Education, said in a blog post that the change "would reverse the 108-year legacy" of the UW-Extension serving Wisconsinites.

"Why would the Board of Regents change the mission statement adding the ability for UW-Extension to offer degree programs when 26 campuses already do that?" Radomski said in an interview. "Do you change your mission that has gone back to 1906 to offer for-credit courses or for-credit degree programs because you're unable to find a partner for competency-based education?"

Sandeen said the Wisconsin Idea was never meant to be "carved in stone and never changed," arguing the university system has recognized the value of serving people in other parts of the U.S. and the world.

(Indeed, the University of Wisconsin at Madison celebrates that kind of work on its website.)

"When we're dealing with technology, there's no reason not to extend beyond the borders of the state," Sandeen said. Still, she stressed that "our emphasis is and always will be within the state of Wisconsin."

UW-Extension's more aggressive

Noel Radomski

play in the adult student market is also drawing questions from institutions in the system that already serve those students. Giving UW-Extension the authority to grant degrees, critics said, could potentially "cannibalize" enrollments at other colleges and further strain their finances.

Beverly Kopper, chancellor of the University of Wisconsin at Whitewater, was one of two chancellors to provide written testimony in a public hearing on the mission change. In an email to the Board of Regents, Kopper questioned whether UW-Extension's expanded role would over-

lap with efforts on her own campus -- particularly UW-Whitewater's online bachelor's degree program in business administration.

"Let me say unequivocally that no one questions UW-Extension's entrepreneurial ability, its commitment to serving adult students or its ability to operationalize the Wisconsin Idea," Kopper wrote. "However, rather than supporting a change in mission, we recommend that UW-Extension refocus its efforts on taking a collaborative approach leading to the development of a collaborative degree program that addresses the roadblocks identified by a number of the UW campuses."

Robert M. Meyer, chancellor of the University of Wisconsin at Stout, raised similar concerns about his institution's online degree-completion program in management. Instead of creating a new program, the system should consider piloting the existing one in a competency-based format, he said in an email.

"We agree with the intent to increase the access of nontraditional students to degree-completion programs in business and management," Meyer wrote. "However, UW-Stout and other comprehensive institutions in the UW System are better positioned to address those needs. Precious resources should be directed at making whatever alterations are needed in our current programs to address unfilled needs, rather than embarking on completely new programs that will duplicate current efforts, require additional infrastructure and create internal

competition for students."

The back and forth between Meyer and Sandeen hints at logistical speed bumps. In her response, Sandeen said UW-Stout "refused to work with UW-Extension to develop a bachelor's degree in business and management." Meyer disagreed with that version of events, saying the university was interested in a certificate program but was "cautious about embarking on developing a full degree program."

Those kinds of disagreements may be why UW-Extension pushed for a mission change. The "overarching motivation" behind the decision was a desire for the university system to be able to produce competency-based programs more quickly, Sandeen said.

UW-Extension is stressing the difference in format to calm concerns that its forthcoming degrees will steal students from other parts of the system.

Online competency-based programs, administrators said, attract a different kind of student than a traditional online course.

"We should not be circling the wagons and shooting at each other when there's this huge number of students to be served," Sandeen said. "We need all of our institutions firing on all cylinders."

'Starting New'

While it now has degree-granting authority, UW-Extension won't hire its own faculty members. Instead, it will "continue to rely on regular faculty from across the UW System to develop curriculum and assessments, and to support the new degrees," according to a press release.

Neither is UW-Extension is asking for any additional funding to support its mission change. Aaron Brower, provost and vice chancellor there, said it will use services already in place -- admissions, financial aid, student records and so on -- to support students in the new degree programs. He also said UW-Extension has set aside money to create the degrees, which will recoup what it cost to build them over three to five years using tuition revenue.

For that model to work, the business and management program needs to enroll about 170 to 190 students a year, Brower said. If enrollments surpass the break-even point, UW-Extension and the partner institution share the revenue.

Brower and Sandeen said UW-Extension's enrollment projections have so far been accurate. Its arts and science, information science and technology, and RN-to-BSN programs are all on track to recoup the initial investments within the five-year period, they said.

As UW-Extension works with the Higher Learning Commission on accreditation, it will need to design administrative structures that support the vision of a "rapid response" institution. UW-Extension may use what Brower described as "virtual" academic departments and "academic approval SWAT teams" to speedily evaluate new programs. Exactly how faculty members at institutions UW-Extension contracts with to develop the new programs will be included in those processes needs to be decided in the next year, he said.

"We're working on a 12-month calendar, and our students are working adults," Brower said.

"From their perspective, it makes no sense that we're holding up a process because our committees don't meet in a timely way. … Rather than shoehorning from a traditional organization and trying to make it fit, we get the advantage of starting new."

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Establishment Goes Alternative

By Paul Fain

Seven major universities plan to create the University Learning Store, a joint web portal for microcredentials, featuring online content, assessments and tutoring.

Traditional colleges have been mostly on the sidelines for the early development of online microcredentials or badges -- the kind that aren't linked to conventional courses and the credit hour. Educational technology companies and other alternative providers have taken the lead in working with employers on these skills-based credentials.

A new prototype from a group of seven brand-name universities could change that.

Tentatively dubbed the University Learning Store, the project is a joint effort involving the Georgia Institute of Technology, Northwestern University, the University of Washington, the University of California's Davis, Irvine and Los Angeles campuses, and the University of Wisconsin Extension.

The partnership remains in its early stages. Officials at Wisconsin Extension, which is playing a prominent role in the work, described it as a joint online platform that will feature modular content, skills assessments and student-facing services, such as tutors, coaches and counselors.

The idea is to create an "alternative credentialing process that would provide students with credentials that are much shorter and cheaper than conventional degrees," said David Schejbal, dean of continuing education, outreach and e-learning at Wisconsin Extension.

As with a department store, Schejbal said, the University Learning Store is about offering students different products from different providers. Students will be able to use online content and assessments -- with pieces from different universities -- to prove what they know and can do.

"These should all fit you," he said. "It would all work for the student."

The plan is for some of the online content to feature modular instruction, said Schejbal, meaning instructors will interact with students as they progress through the material -- as with a conventional online course, but for a shorter duration.

Sometimes, however, the microcredentials will hinge on direct assessment, where students demonstrate their mastery in predetermined areas solely by completing tests, papers and projects. The University of Wisconsin System uses a version of this latter model in its Flexible Option competency-based programs, where faculty members function as academic support coaches.

The microcredentials could be in job-related soft skills, such as in communication, working with other people and customer relations, or in critical reasoning, logic and problem identification, said Schejbal. They also could be more technical, such as content or assessments on climate science, geographic information systems, or agriculture.

The platform would be aimed at entry-level employees and students, as well as midcareer and senior employees, said Deb Bushway, interim associate dean at Wisconsin Extension. That means it would seek to attract both bachelor's degree holders and students who have not earned an associate degree, she said.

"Those distinctions start to fade" with microcredentials, Bushway said. "The degree is almost a distraction."

For example, employees who are managers or even executives might seek out the online platform because they are interested in bulk-

ing up their skills in leadership or budget management. Or they might want to take and pass assessments to display what they already can do in those areas. And whether or not the project is successful largely depends on whether employers value the resulting microcredentials.

'Freemium' and à la Carte

The departure from the conventional college course is what sets this project apart from some of the much more established partnerships between MOOC providers and traditional universities, including some of the ones participating in this prototype.

MOOC providers also issue microcredentials. Coursera offers what it calls Specializations, which are sequences of related courses with a capstone project -- all created by professors at partner universities -- in topics such as cybersecurity, data mining and entrepreneurship. Successful completion leads to a certificate from Coursera.

For example, Coursera offers a Specialization in digital marketing that features a bundle of five online courses from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. It costs about $450. Some of the courses are self-paced and include 10 hours of videos and assessments. One course takes four weeks to complete.

Academic Partnerships, a company that helps colleges offer their courses online, provides similar bundles of courses that lead to certificates. So does edX, a MOOC provider, with its XSeries certificates.

The planned University Learning Store more closely resembles nanodegrees from Udacity, another MOOC provider. The company's online nanodegrees are short-term certificate programs that can be completed in six to 12 months. They are skills based and designed in collaboration with employers, in areas such as Android development or data analysis, at a price of $200 per

> " Students really do need to come in and out of education across a lifetime." The microcredential project is "looking at people who need them regardless of their degree level. "

month.

Schejbal said the project's pricing would be of the "freemium" model. That means some of the content would be free, but students would have to spend money when the universities do. Assessments would come with a price, he said, in part because they would be graded by people rather than computers. Tutoring or other support services would also be fee based.

"Students will be able to buy these à la carte," said Schejbal, "or in a

package."

The planned online store would not be designed to be federal aid eligible, said Schejbal, even though the White House and U.S. Department of Education have expressed interest in experimental pathways to aid eligibility for some similar forms of nontraditional credentials.

"We're imagining that this would be cheap enough for a student to afford without financial aid," he said.

Bushway said it was not clear at this point whether the project would pursue credit-bearing credentials. That likely would require accreditation approval, which can be labor intensive to secure.

The quality of the microcredentials in many ways will hinge on the assessments students must successfully complete to earn them, said Bushway.

The project will feature "authentic" assessments, she said, that in many ways build on Wisconsin's work on competency-based education. Wisconsin Extension is one of a handful of institutions to receive approval from the Education Department and its regional accreditor to offer di-

rect-assessment degrees, which do not rely on the credit hour.

If a student passed an assessment in, say, customer service, that documented skill could be paired with related modular online content, Bushway said.

Taken together, those pieces would stack into some sort of microcredential, badge, nanodegree or whatever term takes hold. Students would be able to display the credential electronically, as in a digital portfolio.

The project's leaders had been working with an outside provider to help build the platform. But Schejbal said the universities eventually had to change gears and begin an open-bid process.

That sort of red tape, which affects public universities much more than ed-tech companies, is an example of the challenges the University Learning Store likely will face. (All but one of the group of seven universities are public.)

That said, the assorted universi-ties tout heavy-hitter brands. And the project shows that the group is willing to think beyond what Schejbal calls the "blunt instrument of the degree," with a focus on students who are working adults, not just 18- to 22-year-olds on residential campuses.

"Students really do need to come in and out of education across a lifetime," said Schejbal, adding that the microcredential project is "looking at people who need them regardless of their degree level." ∎

https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/08/14/group-seven-major-universities-seeks-offer-online-microcredentials

Moving Ahead With Competency

By Paul Fain

Eight Washington State community colleges will offer an online, competency-based business degree, as emerging form of higher education wins fans -- and some critics-- in the state.

The online, competency-based certificate Bellevue College offered in 2014 was a hit with students. In fact, the certificate in business software was so popular that the two-year college in Washington State decided to drop its conventional online version.

"The train has left the station at Bellevue," said Suzanne Marks, a faculty member who teaches business technology systems and is the program's chair. "We went from pilot to permanent, immediately."

The certificate was part of phase

one of an experiment by a handful of Washington's 34 community and technical colleges. The next phase, which began in January 2015, is the creation of a fully online, competency-based associate degree in business.

The degree will be a transfer credential, meaning students should be able to move easily to four-year institutions. The courses will feature only free and open content. And Lumen Learning, an Oregon-based company, is designing the material to be adaptive, meaning it will respond to each student's prior knowledge.

Competency will replace grades in the degree track, with the equivalent of a B being the minimum mark students must meet.

"They keep trying until they're done," said Connie Broughton, who works at the Washington State Board for Technical and Community Colleges and directs the project.

Columbia Basin College, which is the system's lead institution for the business degree, received approval from its regional accreditor for the program. It has begun marketing the degree, which, although linked to the credit-hour standard, includes elements of self-pacing. The program will also feature assessments that students can take and pass without completing course material.

Seven other two-year colleges in Washington, including Bellevue, plan to sign on and begin offering the competency-based associate degree later this year, according to Broughton.

A key reason for the degree's creation was research showing that there are 1 million people in the state with some college credits and no degree. Broughton said many of those people need a flexible form of higher education to go back and earn their degree.

"We saw that we need to serve learners who are not with us now," she said. "The goal is, eventually, every college can do this."

Washington's two-year colleges have joined more than 200 other institutions around the country that are giving competency-based education a whirl. However, some faculty groups at the Washington colleges have criticized the move. They said the competency-based credentials were created without adequate faculty input, and that the programs will create more work for faculty members.

Karen Strickland, president of the American Federation of Teachers of Washington, a faculty union, said administrators have not always acknowledged the new responsibilities competency-based credentials create for instructors. She also said

faculty members were concerned about how the programs "disaggregate" the faculty role. They break apart the degree track with a canned curriculum and modularized course content, she said, which can be offered by a different college than the one where instructors work.

"It's a generic degree from another college," said Strickland. "What we oppose is corporatization of the learning process."

Tapping Expertise

The project in Washington began with a hand from Western Governors University, a pioneer in competency-based learning. The nonprofit university in 2013 began working with 11 community colleges in 5 states -- including the 4 in Washington -- to help those institutions design their own competency-based credentials in information technology. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the U.S. Department of Labor chipped in funding for the project.

WGU ran workshops in those five states to expose faculty members and administrators to the emerging form of higher education. Attendees in Washington ranged from vice presidents to online instructors and registrars.

The sessions "started to get the idea of competency-based education into the cultural soup," said Rich Cummins, president of Columbia Basin College.

Soon four colleges in the state began offering short-term, competency-based certificates in business

and I.T. As part of those programs, students take a pretest at the beginning of each course to identify their strengths and weaknesses. They can use those results to move faster through material they understand, earning credits when instructors deem them competent.

The competency-based courses feature both course instructors and a navigator for students, who serves as a sort of advisor, providing support and helping them to select course sequences.

Three days into offering the certificate, Bellevue had enrolled 104 students in the program, said Marks. Another 107 or so enrolled during the second quarter.

"Students voted with their feet," she said. In particular, Marks said students like the self-pacing, the flexible due dates for work and the program's "high-tech, high-touch" approach.

Faculty members had to do a lot of work up front to create the programs. Mapping course competencies in particular is laborious, said Marks.

But there was a payoff for instructors as well as students, she said.

"It makes you pay more attention to instructional design, your outcomes and your assessments."

Other faculty members at Bellevue were less enthusiastic. And some have expressed concern about the college's attempt to join the Columbia Basin pilot group. Several signed a letter expressing concern about who is overseeing quality control for the degree.

"It will be taught by non-Bellevue College faculty, developed by non-Bellevue College faculty and with assessments formulated by a third party, Lumen Learning," the faculty members wrote. "Should Bellevue College lend its name to this degree?"

Self-Paced Model

The eight participating colleges in the consortium contributed a total of $1.4 million for the creation of the online transfer degree.

The costs went toward the hiring of four full-time faculty members, who will oversee the business core of the program. Columbia Basin also hired six part-time faculty members to run the general education side of the degree track.

Cummins said the program will need about 400 students to break even. Other colleges can then join by creating their own online portals for the degree track, which should be fairly simple.

"We don't believe it's going to fail," he said.

A key innovation of the program, said Cummins and others, is that students will be able to begin when they like during the first three months of each term. They must enroll full-time for the second chunk of three months.

Tuition is a $2,667 flat fee per six-month term. There is a $40 assessment fee. The program includes 18 courses, all competency based and online.

Students must earn at least 20 credits per term, but can earn more at no cost. Cummins called this an "all you can eat" model.

Columbia Basin's role is about social mobility, he said. And the competency-based degree will allow "distant students to move at their own speed as well as their own time and place while ensuring a greater level of rigor across distance learning offerings." ∎

Mobile Bachelor's Degree

By Paul Fain

Brandman University goes all-in with a competency-based bachelor's degree that is online, available on a tablet, and not based on the credit hour. Its projected price tag? $10,000.

Brandman University's competency-based bachelor's degree gives a glimpse of where the increasingly popular form of higher education might be headed.

The new bachelor of business administration is fully online. There are no textbooks. Students can access 30,000 pages of course material for the degree (not all of it required) on their tablets or smartphones.

Content is personalized, and responds to the 44 currently enrolled students based on their progress. About 60 percent of the required 80-plus "competencies" are linked to performance-based assessments, like writing a paper, working on a group project or creating a portfolio. The rest of the work is objective-based, such as test-taking.

The degree is also completely severed from the credit-hour standard. Brandman is one of four institutions to get both the U.S. Department of Education and its regional accreditor to sign off on this type of program, which is called "direct assessment." That approach means students can work at their own pace while also receiving federal financial aid.

Brandman estimates the typical student will be able to complete the degree in 30 months. At $5,400 in tuition and fees per year, that means some students should be able to earn the bachelor's degree for $10,000. That amount has become a trendy target price for a four-year degree, particularly among conservative governors. Students who take longer to complete than the expected 30 months will pay more than $13,500, however.

One reason students should be able to finish quicker than in a traditional program is that they can work toward the degree during 48 weeks of a year, rather than on a semester schedule. They will have an academic coach and access to tutoring faculty throughout.

"You can do it in bits and pieces," said Laurie Dodge, Brandman's vice chancellor of institutional assessment and planning and vice provost, adding that students can "be working on more than one competency at a time."

That's important for the nonprofit Brandman, whose students tend to be adults with jobs.

The university is a subsidiary of Chapman University, a private, residential institution based in Orange County, Calif. Brandman, however, offers blended and online degrees out of its almost 30 campus locations in California and Washington State. About 88 percent of the university's 12,000 students are at least 25 years old. Roughly half (46 percent) are eligible to receive Pell Grants, and 43 percent are members of minority groups.

Nontraditional students -- who aren't 18-24 and interested in attending a residential campus -- appear to be a natural fit for the flexibility of competency-based learning, which allows them to move more quickly through material they already know or to spend more time on concepts when needed.

Many of the more than 200 institutions that are currently adding competency-based degrees are focused on working adults. Yet experts said Brandman has gone further than most.

In addition to its successful pursuit of direct assessment, the university is "possibly unique" in having taken an existing undergraduate major and rebuilt it as a compe-

tency-based program, said Mike Offerman, a consultant and president emeritus of Capella University.

As a result, Brandman's foray is "more institutional and systemic" than those of most other institutions, many of which have created new competency-based programs outside of their core bachelor's degree programs.

Rigor and Business-Friendly

Several outside vendors want to help colleges give competency-based education a whirl.

College for America, a subsidiary of Southern New Hampshire University, recently spun off its competency-based learning platform. The nonprofit institution's new offering, Motivis, is now a for-profit company that offers its services to other colleges.

Likewise, Fidelis Education's learning relationship management system (LRM) can work for institutions with competency-based

degrees. Gunnar Counselman, the company's founder and CEO, said one institution is using the system this way, and another 20 plan to create competency-based badges to supplement their core curriculums. Educate Online is another player in this new field.

For its experimental degree, Brandman partnered with Flat World Knowledge, a company based in Washington, D.C., which got its start as a digital textbook publisher. Flat World now offers a competency-based learning platform.

Christopher Etesse, the company's chief executive officer, said demand for competency-based education is "hotter and moving faster

than the LMS market was in 1997."

Brandman's faculty members began designing its bachelor's degree about two years ago, bringing Flat World in last April. One of the university's first steps was to poll 1,000 students to gauge interest in a competency-based program.

They got a positive response, and moved on to asking employers for guidance. The goal, Brandman officials said, was to ensure that the program would teach skills that applied to the workplace. To help make that happen, the initial group of students all came from one of the university's 27 employers it had sought out as partners for the degree program. College for America also draws its students from employers.

"The real entry point for competency-based education is businesses," said Gary Brahm, Brandman's chancellor and chief executive officer.

The university relied on industry standards to get the

> **The real entry point for competetency-based education is business.**

knowledge, skills and abilities students need to enter business jobs. It also drew from federal jobs databases to learn more about specific occupations.

On the academic side, Brandman leaned heavily on two frameworks for the new degree -- Lumina Foundation's Degree Qualifications Profile and the Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) from the Association of American Colleges and Universities.

Both of those initiatives seek to better define what students should know and be able to do. They also stress the importance of academically sound general-education requirements.

Flat World helped customize a platform for the university that in-cluded simulations, game-like elements and social-learning elements. The system collects data on student performance and engagement that can help faculty members and student advisers, said Etesse.

"We built that tracking factor into the software," he said.

The Accreditor's Approval

The university's regional accreditor, the senior college commission of the

Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC), granted its approval to Brandman's direct- assessment program in 2014. The U.S. Education Department followed suit.

Alison Kadlec is a senior vice president for Public Agenda, a New York City-based nonprofit. She is helping lead a Lumina-funded group of 18 institutions and two public systems that are experimenting with competency-based education. The group, which is dubbed the Competency-Based Education Network (C-BEN), announced that it is seeking new members.

Brandman is a leader in competency-based education, Kadlec said, in part because its first focus was academic rigor.

"Institutions that are tempted to look for easy answers in the form of shiny tech solutions should take a page out of Brandman's book," she said via email, "and focus first on quality program design and let the technology solutions emerge from that solid grounding." ∎

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Views

A selection of essays and op-eds

Solving Yesterday's Problems Constrains Tomorrow's Solutions

By Paul LeBlanc

The onus is on policy makers to create new regulatory frameworks to support needed innovation in areas like competency-based education, writes Paul LeBlanc.

In a letter to the Higher Learning Commission, the largest of the regional accreditors, the U.S. Education Department's Office of Inspector General offered a scathing review of the commission's approvals for direct-assessment competency-based education programs. The review highlighted the fundamental challenges facing a movement that has been washing like a wave over higher education. The OIG's more rigid reading of the rules for faculty interaction with students may have a chilling effect on accreditors, who could become more concerned about running afoul of the OIG than of heeding calls to be supportive of much-needed innovation in higher education.

In just two years, we have gone from a handful of CBE programs and almost none offering direct assessment -- the unwieldy name for CBE programs not tied to the credit hour -- to more than 600 institutions working on such offerings. Those institutions include community colleges, independent colleges and universities, and public institutions like the University of Michigan and the University of Texas.

In contrast to the rapid expansion of for-profit online education a decade ago, the primary providers today are nonprofit institutions. While most programs are still being designed within traditional credit-hour frameworks and thus Title IV rules of financial aid disbursement, an increasing number seek to be untethered to the credit hour and its

trumping of time over actual learning. They have the support of leaders in the Education Department, the White House and both parties of Congress.

Enter the OIG, which operates independently within the Education Department, auditing and investigating department programs. The recent letter to the Higher Learning Commission reasserts the use of the "regular and substantive interaction between faculty and students" rule to distinguish between conventional Title IV-eligible programs and correspondence programs, which have greater restrictions on aid eligibility and ruinous stigma attached to them. The OIG, acutely aware of the abuses in correspondence programs in the 2000s, takes a very

conservative interpretation of the rule and posits a traditional faculty instructional role.

However, many of the most innovative CBE programs unbundle that role, using faculty members in various ways, such as subject matter experts, reviewers and for learning support, while relying on "coaches" for some of the advising and mentoring roles often associated with faculty. Such programs are also introducing breakthrough technologies that can offer personalized learning and robust support not possible just 10 years ago.

The Education Department's own guidance to institutions tacitly acknowledged such an unbundling process in its December 2014 dear colleague letter when it talked about interactions between students and "institutional staff," and it offered more explicit guidance this September in its Competency-Based Education Experiment Reference Guide. That detailed and much-awaited guidance reaffirms the need for students to have "access to qualified faculty," but it allows for the unbundling of faculty roles, for "regular and substantive" interaction to be "broadly interpreted," and for "periodic" interaction to be "event driven."

It shares the OIG's basic concern when it asserts that "it is incumbent on the institution to demonstrate that students are not left to educate themselves, a chief characteristic of correspondence programs." But it also understands that there are now many exciting alternatives to "self-learning" that do not look like traditional classrooms.

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Subject: Competency-Based Education Programs- Questions and Answers

Summary: The attachment to this letter provides, in a Question and Answer (Q&A) format, guidance to institutions regarding the eligibility of competency-based education programs, which include direct assessment programs, under existing statutory and regulatory requirements for the Title IV, Higher Education Act of 1965, as amended (HEA) student assistance programs.

A lot of the innovation underway in CBE rests on adaptive learning technologies, powerful analytics and customer relationship management tools, learning science, and improved practices in everything from advising to learning design. But those advances -- all emerging after the correspondence program abuses of 20 years ago -- are unacknowledged in the OIG's report.

And the report's authors continue to use time as a proxy for learning, as when they use phrases like, "even though the applications described the proposed programs as self-paced ...." Pacing is largely irrelevant in a direct-assessment world where outcomes, not seat time, matter.

The report rightly points out a need for clarity of approval processes and better communications. Institutions have long been frustrated by the opaque nature of both the Education Department's and at least some of the accreditors' approval processes, including the Higher Learning Commission's. Ironically, though, just as the accreditors nd the department have improved their guidance -- witness the Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions' guidance in June and the department's expanded CBE guidance in September -- the OIG report will very likely make things worse again as both parties scramble to respond and alter their processes in whatever ways they feel necessary.

New Regulatory Frameworks

Congress can fix this mess (come on now, hold back that snickering). It can create a demonstration project that allows non-credit-hour CBE -- let's please drop "direct assessment," as all CBE programs directly assess student mastery of competencies -- the kind of latitude for providing the functions that faculty have traditionally provided, while not reifying their roles. It can use the occasion to also provide for subscription models of disbursing

Title IV, rethinking time-based measures like Satisfactory Academic Progress, tying aid disbursement to mastery of competencies and finally, getting Title IV rules to align with the legislative intent of an alternative to the credit hour.

It can then use that demonstration project and what we learn from it to inform the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act. Given the bipartisan support for CBE, the demonstration project can be easily created, and it would be a useful mechanism for informing the more complicated process of reauthorization.

Republican Congressman John Kline of Minnesota, chair of the House Education and Workforce Committee, can immediately address the need by reintroducing a widely supported CBE bill from 2014.

Former Senator Tom Harkin, a Democrat from Iowa and then chair of the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, would not take up the bill, a missed opportunity.

His successor in the Senate, Republican Senator Lamar Alexander of Tennessee, should consider a demonstration project as a useful step towards reauthorization, a source of learning to inform better policy making, and act to support the innovation he has rightly called for in HELP Committee hearings.

In the end, the OIG is simply enforcing the law and rules that Congress and the Department of Education have created. While its lawyers, auditors and investigators are by nature and training biased toward a more conservative, even rigid, reading of the rules, it is not their job to make the rules.

They will enforce what Congress creates.

So the onus is on policy makers to create new regulatory frameworks with enough latitude to better provide for innovation and the learning still underway, enough quality assurance to discourage shoddily designed programs, and enough regulatory oversight to prevent the abuses that still inform the OIG's concerns with CBE programs. ∎

Bio

Paul LeBlanc is president of Southern New Hampshire University. He worked as a senior policy advisor to Under Secretary Ted Mitchell in the U.S. Department of Education from March to June 2015, focusing on CBE programs and innovation.

https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2015/10/26/overregulation-competency-based-education-essay

The Coaching Transformation

By Christine Seifert and Richard Chapman

Shifting from being a professor to a coach in a competency-based program isn't easy, write Christine Seifert and Richard Chapman, but it pays off for both students and instructors.

Popular culture images of teaching would have us believe that the very best college professors speak from the front of a large lecture hall filled with eager young students listening to every word we utter. Or we sit at the head of a round table in a well-appointed seminar room peopled with rapt graduate students who wish to learn from our years of reading, thinking and writing. If cultural representations are any indication, professors are mere keepers of knowledge, the troll at the gate our students must pass.

The reality of higher education is that learning rarely happens in rows of seats in front of which stands a charismatic professor in tweed. The academic landscape has changed in dramatic ways, particularly as we use new platforms and technologies to interact with students. Innovative approaches to teaching and learning, such as competency-based education, increasingly rely on coaching models, a method of learning that challenges our popular conception of what it means to be a professor.

As faculty members in competency-based graduate and undergraduate programs, we have shifted from professors to coaches, a move that has yielded astounding results in terms of student learning, retention and graduation.

Coaching is a personalized and continuous process that facilitates student learning and development to improve performance in solving discipline-related problems. Faculty coaches question the learner until the learner acquires facts and builds ideas for creative problem solving.

The end goals of coaching include: building student awareness of how to approach complicated problems, increasing learner confidence by helping him or her figure out an individualized approach to problem solving, and motivating learners to improve performance by acting as a constant source of support. Coaching is not advice giving, mentoring or the mere act of transferring skills from an expert to a nonexpert. Effective coaches enable the development and action planning of a learner.

Coaching looks markedly different from teaching. For instance, learners in our competency-based programs meet with faculty by phone, synchronous online communication software or in person every two weeks at a minimum, with meetings lasting about 30 minutes. Coaches begin each conversation by building a connection with learners. They then proceed to a review of learner-generated action items from previous coaching sessions. Coaches and learners celebrate successes, but also have frank discussions about missed opportunities, roadblocks or negative behaviors. Coaching sessions end with learner-generated action items and clear measurable goals.

Admittedly, coaching is not a low-cost option for education. But it is a powerful pedagogy for learning, building relationships and increasing learners' skill sets, particularly in individualized and self-paced environments such as competency-based programs. Coaching adds structure to learning. By facilitating goal setting for projects and holding learners accountable, coaches ensure that learners continuously move toward graduation. The coaching process also provides a context for learners to identify and develop skills necessary for successful careers.

Our experience with coaching has led to a variety of benefits, both for

us and for our students.

Christine Seifert

Benefit 1: Coaching builds stronger relationships between faculty coach and student.

Coaching delivers results because of the supportive relationship between the coach and the learner. Good professors, regardless of the learning model, develop strong professional relationships with students. The best coaches, however, do not provide subject matter expertise. Instead, coaches provide encouragement, feedback and structure.

Coaches don't provide answers, but help students find the resources they need to solve problems. For example, one of us coaches students who are creating communication strategy plans. We might find it tempting to tell the student exactly how to research, write and present a plan, but that's not our job. Instead, we have to ask pointed questions that prompt the student to find the resources she needs to complete the task.

Benefit 2: Coaching enhances student performance, including non-content-related performance.

Strong coaching inevitably leads to discussions beyond the subject matter. Performance coaches can help students situate what they are learning in terms of content within their short- and long-term academic and career goals. The coaching process provides personal and professional attention and detail to career planning, something more and more learners are demanding from higher education. For example, one of us coached a student who found himself in a job he hated and working for a company whose core values were the antithesis of his own. Meeting regularly with the student, the coach helped create a strategy to change career paths and help the student find employment with his dream company.

Benefit 3: Coaching better emulates the kind of relationship students will have outside the university.

Few other institutions outside of the academy will provide students with an expert at the front of the room who will present information to a large group of people who all have varying needs, interests, talents and experience. Coaching better represents the kind of guided relationships students will have with superiors, co-workers and collaborators in future environments.

Benefit 4: Coaching increases retention.

When students develop a personal relationship with their faculty coach, they are more likely to reach out when they need help and are less likely to disappear. For those reasons, we've seen increased retention in our coaching-based programs. Westminster College has two competency-based graduate programs -- a master's of strategic communication and a project-based master's of business administration. The strategic communication degree program has a retention rate of 94 percent over several years and the MBA has a retention rate of 91 percent.

Benefit 5: Coaching provides more bang for students' buck.

Coaching models do not lower the cost of instruction. In many cases, it will increase costs. But research from the Annenberg Foundation for Education Reform shows that coaching promotes the implementation of learning and reciprocal accountability. Tuition dollars go to individualized, one-on-one instruction, providing results, something that many students are willing to pay for.

Shifts toward coaching models of education will require faculty and students to reconsider their roles. It also will require institutions to revise persistent and outdated notions about what it means to be an effec-

tive teacher. These shifts do present some challenges.

Richard Chapman

Challenge 1: Coaching requires new or redesigned evaluation processes (including rethinking tenure and promotion requirements).

Most faculty coaches must work within evaluation systems that have been created with traditional models of education in mind. For example, faculty who participate in coaching spend much more time per student, which means that large course loads are almost impossible without course assistants, especially if the faculty member is going to remain active in producing scholarship.

Because faculty coaches do their work via phone, Skype or in their offices, they are doing their work in less public venues. Faculty and administrators who review faculty performance based on face time might assume that coaches aren't per-

forming at the same level as more visible faculty members.

Challenge 2: Coaching, if not done right, can be disastrous for students.

Coaching cannot be done effectively without proper training for the coaches and the students. Bad coaches will not only tarnish the experience for the student, they can damage the reputation of coaching-based programs. We've seen problems arise in cases where faculty members simply want to transfer what they do in the classroom to the coaching venue. Good coaching requires training and effective transitions to truly benefit students.

Challenge 3: Coaching requires thoughtful scheduling and clear boundaries.

Because coaching creates a deeper relationship between faculty and student, coaches must be aware of setting clear boundaries. Students will push to make faculty available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Good coaches are accessible within reason, but they also teach students to respect time. We've learned that we have to set boundaries with students early in the process. First, we give them two or three choices for

scheduling coaching calls. Then, we set an example by keeping that appointment, being on time for the call, staying on topic during the call and closing within the agreed-upon time. Finally, at the end of the call, we schedule our next check-in and reiterate our commitment to keeping that appointment.

Challenge 4: Coaching might be seen as an argument for eliminating full-time faculty.

Coaching can be done successfully by part-time faculty, but it cannot be done exclusively by adjunct labor. Coaches should be fully trained, regularly assessed and kept abreast of best practices and research in coaching models. Subject matter coaches are also imperative for helping students learn complex and complicated content. Such work cannot be turned over to less-qualified instructors or to robots, as faculty might fear.

Coaching won't eradicate the problems of higher education, but it can offer students the kind of individualized and personalized learning that they need and want. Shifting to a coaching model, though, requires that we all rethink our notions about what it means to be a faculty member. ■

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The Course Is Dead. Long Live the Course.

By Dan Butin

The pushes toward modular instruction and competency-based education are significant, but don't expect traditional forms of teaching to disappear, writes Dan Butin.

It may be surreal to suggest that the college course is going the way of the dinosaur. Twenty million postsecondary students are streaming back onto college campuses, filing into lecture halls, and bracing for yet another semester of study. Sure, a fair portion of them will be doing this on their laptops. But even then, they'll still have a professor and all the trappings (a syllabus, an overarching theme, a grade that gets put on their transcript) of a traditional semester-long course.

And yet, "The very notion of a 'class' may be outdated." So suggest the authors of a Massachusetts Institute of Technology report. MIT has spent over a year investigating the question of the future of residential education and has begun to systematically explore, among other things, the "modularization" of the curriculum into smaller Lego-like units that can be taken apart and put together in a myriad of ways.

"This," the report argues, "in many ways mirrors the preferences of students on campus. The unbundling of classes also reflects a larger trend in society — a number of other media offerings have become available in modules, whether it is a song from an album, an article in a newspaper, or a chapter from a textbook. Modularity also enables 'just-in-time' delivery of instruction, further enabling project-based learning on campus and for students worldwide."

For MIT and other institutions who have come to similar conclusions (see, for example, the University of Wisconsin at Madison and Harvard University), the push comes from both the successes and challenges of digital learning technologies (such as MOOCs) that have proliferated in the last few years. But even more than that, they are well aware of what's on the horizon.

"Might the Online Skills Academy," muses Paul LeBlanc in a recent op-ed about the U.S. Department of Education's "experimental sites" initiative, "be a first step to creating a new alternative pathway to a degree, one that actually creates a new higher education ecosystem that can sit beside and maybe improve our existing system?" For LeBlanc and many others, competency-based education offers a credible alternative to today's "deeply flawed" system. "I am instead thinking about a nationally offered, extremely low-cost, competency-based model degree program that includes stackable, industry-embraced credentials."

This, dear reader, is the beginning of the end for the college course. Not everywhere. Not for everyone. Not immediately. But for much of our current postsecondary system, much of what we do in our "chalk-and-talk" educational model can be automated and replaced by cheaper and more efficient systems. And I, for one, can't wait to see it happen. Because, I suggest, it will allow us and force us to develop a system that sees the college course as not just the transmission of academic knowledge but as its use and transformation.

For the competency-based education (CBE) crowd, this will be about demonstrating proficiency – through portfolios, exams, or other standardized means where "time is irrelevant and mastery non-negotiable" – that shatters the monopoly of the credit hour. It suggests that the product matters, not the process. It is a one-for-one swap: forget the four years on campus; just show us that you have learned.

For the MIT crowd, this will be

about finding the sweet spot of deep learning – through a blended mix of online and on-site modules, projects and courses curated by faculty and informed by the learning sciences and data analytics – that shatters the monopoly of an "is it on the exam?" student mentality (yes, it happens at MIT as well). It suggests that we must fundamentally revise the process if we are to change the product. It is backward design approach: the four years on campus are useless if you don't come out transformed.

But in either case, the traditional course is dead.

I am not simply talking about the fact that, as the saying goes, "online education starts in the seventh row." Sure, there is nothing to be gained from sitting in a lecture hall when you can watch the archived lecture online while pulling up a tutorial or a peer's comments about the lecture as you go through it. I am talking about the realization that CBE and digital learning technologies give us the unique opportunity to rethink and revise our models of teaching and learning from the ground up.

I, of course, have to voice some caveats and concerns.

CBE, for all its emphasis on "mastery as non-negotiable," has no theory of learning. CBE advocates avoid talking about how students will actually learn to demonstrate mastery. This has troubling implications for who supposedly can and can't learn and the structural impediments to and stratification of academic success.

Similarly, MIT's model confuses the way we learn with the way we teach. A single module is actually not like a single song, book chapter or newspaper article. A song can stand on its own, as it has a self-contained narrative arc and structure. But to see a module as a "mini-course" – kind of like a highlight reel of best lecture quotes – is to cater to a style of teaching rather than to a way of learning.

If I could mix and match these two perspectives, I might suggest that we view the MIT module in exactly the way that CBE proponents view their competencies: as transmitting information to gain highly bounded skills and knowledge that are linked explicitly to specific learning outcomes.

Think of modules more like a football player training certain fundamental skills and moves that he can then deploy automatically and fluidly and improvisationally in a game depending on the situation. Such skills and knowledge are crucial – as they form the foundation for the habits of mind and repertoires of action that we think of in experts – but they are in and of themselves almost irrelevant if they do not get used in practice. In this vision, a "course" becomes a set of mastered units of knowledge (modules) that are integrated into a project- or practice-based outcome. Put otherwise, the transmission of academic knowledge is a necessary but not sufficient condition to count as a course, which must be able to apply and transform such academic knowledge.

In either case, though, when both Southern New Hampshire University and MIT are grappling with the future of the college course – which has served as the basic unit and building block for all of higher education – we are seeing a system truly shattering. The question for all of us is what will be built up instead. ∎

Bio

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