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What Is Competency-Based Education?

By Dr. Robert Mendenhall

Competency-based education has become a hot topic in higher education circles these days — it is becoming increasingly popular as the country searches for ways to improve college affordability and more accurately measure student learning. There are almost as many institutions claiming to have competency-based education as there are definitions, so it seems worthwhile to define what competency-based learning is and how it can benefit higher education in the United States.

What is competency-based education and what makes it different? The most important characteristic of competency-based education is that it measures learning rather than time. Students progress by demonstrating their competence, which means they prove that they have mastered the knowledge and skills (called competencies) required for a particular course, regardless of how long it takes. While more traditional models can and often do measure competency, they are time-based — courses last about four months, and students may advance only after they have put in the seat time. This is true even if they could have completed the coursework and passed the final exam in half the time. So, while most colleges and universities hold time requirements constant and let learning vary, competency-based learning allows us to hold learning constant and let time vary.

While competency-based education is better for all students because it allows them to study and learn at their own pace, it is particularly ideal for the 37 million American adults with some college but no degree. It makes it possible for them to come back and complete a degree, which can mean a better job, higher earning potential, and a better life.

We know two things about adult learners — they come to higher education knowing different things, and they learn at different rates. Competency-based education recognizes this reality and matches the education to the student. Unlike a one-size-fits-all approach, it allows adults to come back to college and apply what they've learned, either through formal education or their work and life experience. They can move quickly through material they already know and focus on what they still need to learn. For many, this means that they can accelerate their progress toward a degree, saving both time and money.

Implemented effectively, competency-based education can improve quality and consistency, reduce costs, shorten the time required to graduate, and provide us with true measures of student learning. We must:

1. Measure student learning rather than time.
2. Harness the power of technology for teaching and learning. Computer-mediated instruction gives us the ability to individualize learning for each student. Because each student learns at a different pace and comes to college knowing different things, this is a fundamental requirement of competency-based education.

3. Fundamentally change the faculty role. When faculty serve as lecturers, holding scheduled classes for a prescribed number of weeks, the instruction takes place at the lecturers' pace. For most students, this will be the wrong pace. Some will need to go more slowly; others will be able to move much faster. Competency-based learning shifts the role of the faculty from that of "a sage on the stage" to a "guide on the side." Faculty members work with students, guiding learning, answering questions, leading discussions, and helping students synthesize and apply knowledge.

4. Define competencies and develop valid, reliable assessments. The fundamental premise of competency-based education is that we define what students should know and be able to do, and they graduate when they have demonstrated their competency. This means that we have to define the competencies very clearly. Getting industry input is essential to make sure that we've identified relevant competencies. Once the competencies are established, we need experts in assessment to ensure that we're measuring the right things.

The benefits of this competency-based approach have been recognized by policy makers and influencers in higher education. The Center for American Progress recently released a [white paper](#) that found, "Competency-based education could be the key to providing quality postsecondary education to millions of Americans at lower cost." In a speech last fall, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan referred to Western Governors University's competency-based degree programs, saying, "While such programs are now the exception, I want them to be the norm."

While policy makers are praising competency-based education, not enough is being done to ensure that our rules and regulations support it. For example, financial aid rules are generally based on seat time, and accreditation requirements tend to focus on reviews of faculty credentials, course materials, and time measures rather than what students are learning. Moving competency-based education into the mainstream will require a fundamental change in the way we look at higher education in America, but the improvements we will gain in student learning, efficiency, and affordability will be worth it.

Dr. Robert W. Mendenhall is the President of Western Governors University, a nonprofit, competency-based, online university with more than 34,000 students and 17,000 graduates in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. In the past several months, Dr. Mendenhall has been invited to the White House and the Senate to present the WGU model and show how WGU uses technology to change the way higher education is delivered. WGU offers more than 50 bachelor's and master's degrees in the high-demand fields of business, information technology, K-12 teacher education, and health professions, including nursing. www.wgu.edu.

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