

Chapter 17

FLEX Path: Capella University's Innovative Pathway to a Degree

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ABSTRACT

Capella University was founded in 1993 to serve adults who wanted access to high-quality higher education to maximize their personal and professional potential. In the early 2000s, to better serve its mission, Capella extended its online education focus and began offering competency-based curriculum. Already a leader in online, adult-serving higher education, Capella responded to the external pressures of access and completion, affordability, and filling the gap between employers' hiring needs and satisfaction with recent graduates. The response was the development of FlexPath, a competency-based education and direct assessment option to pursue a degree that signifies clear demonstration of professionally relevant competencies. In 2013 FlexPath was the first direct assessment option to receive approval by a regional accreditor (the Higher Learning Commission) and the Department of Education for federal financial aid eligibility at the bachelor's and master's levels.

INTRODUCTION

To begin to address the question of competency-based education's potential for a broad population of students, let's consider a common scenario for a non-traditional student: a single mother with a bachelor's degree has been working for the past 10 years in project management for a large corporation; she has been promoted several times, but she has greater ambitions and feels that if she had an MBA, she might be considered for a leadership position at one of the nonprofit organizations she values in her community. She applies to traditional MBA programs, gets in, and hopes she'll be able to manage the course schedule on top of her already busy life. Once in the classroom, though, she finds she already

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has a significant understanding of much of the curriculum because of her day-to-day work. The courses feel redundant, and she is unable to progress at her own pace, so she disengages. “I’m not going to class to learn what I already know,” she tells her advisor.

Competency-based education (CBE) and, more specifically, self-paced direct assessment pathways to degrees, is one answer to these challenges. The direct assessment approach bases both the evaluation of student achievement and the award of a degree or credential solely on the demonstration of competencies (C-RAC, 2015, p.1) (see the list of terms at the chapter’s end). This means the measurement of learning has no direct relation to “seat time,” the credit hour, credits, textbooks, course “material,” or grades. Direct assessment’s flexibility and the ability of students to move quickly through areas in which they already have significant competence, makes it particularly promising for working adults seeking to fulfill their personal and professional potential without the constraints of weekly deadlines and attendance requirements, and without having to take foundational courses in topics they know inside out from their on-the-job or military experience.

In 2001, the National Postsecondary Education Cooperative (NPEC) published a report on competency-based learning which remains a foundational work for educators interested in leveraging this modality. NPEC defined a *competency* as “a combination of skills, abilities, and knowledge needed to perform a specific task” (U.S. Department of Education, 2001, p. 1). CBE has become a respected approach to learning and measuring mastery which has positive disruptive potential and is seen by many in the higher education community as a standard of the future, especially for non-traditional students. Indeed, the current higher education model—for how we measure learning and assign credit, administer financial aid, and engage faculty expertise and gain value from their instruction—needs to be disrupted if we are truly to expand access to and success in higher education. Especially for working adult learners with other commitments in their lives, self-paced, competency-based online or hybrid-online models could greatly increase both the accessibility and affordability of higher education. When supported by a regulatory environment conducive to innovation, the expansion of the model, with the likelihood of higher completion rates, could have great ramifications for the country’s economy and standard of living. With the passage of the Advancing Competency-Based Education Demonstration Project Act (HR3136) in 2014, Congress has recognized the great potential of this model.

Capella University: An Industry Leader

Capella University was founded in 1993 with a mission to extend access to high-quality higher education for working adults, and has developed a higher education model that attempts to deliver on the promises of CBE. Capella’s bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral degrees and certificate programs have been offered online through a learning-outcomes- and competency-based curriculum since 2002 and rely on the documented alignment of all curricular, instructional, and assessment components. We have long been engaged in the public discussion around higher education reform and academic quality and have actively supported initiatives by groups such as the New Leadership Alliance for Student Learning and Accountability and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The university is a member of the Lumina Foundation-sponsored Competency-Based Education Network (C-BEN). Capella has received numerous awards for our curriculum, instructional, and assessment model, including the Eduventures 2015 Innovation Award and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) Award for Outstanding Institutional Practice in Student Learning Outcomes, in 2010. We were the first online university to receive the CHEA award, which was given based on four award criteria: articulation and evidence

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