

Chapter 76

Creating Connections: Competency-Based Degree Programs and Undergraduate Capstone Courses for Adult Learners

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ABSTRACT

Undergraduate adult learners need flexible, cost-efficient ways to increase knowledge, enhance skills, or complete a college degree. The rising cost of college tuition coupled with the demands of work/life balance challenge many individuals seeking a higher education degree. As such, higher education administrators and faculty members need to identify new approaches to learning in higher education that address these barriers and open the access to earning a college degree. Capstone courses connect prior learning in coursework with real-world experiences. This chapter addresses competency-based degree plans and application-based capstone courses for undergraduate university students. Examples of competency-based degree plans and capstone courses will be discussed. Inclusion in the discussion will be prior learning assessment courses. Testimonials from learners are provided along with a model for designing an effective capstone course for undergraduate adult learners.

INTRODUCTION

Competency-based education allows adult learners with the opportunity to save time and money in earning a college degree. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2018), “By enabling students to master skills at their own pace, competency-based learning systems help to save both time and money. Depending on the strategy pursued, competency-based systems also create multiple pathways to graduation, make better use of technology, support new staffing patterns that utilize teacher skills and interests differently, take advantage of learning opportunities outside of school hours and walls, and help identify opportunities to target interventions to meet the specific learning needs of students. Each of these presents an opportunity to achieve greater efficiency and increase productivity,” (p.1).

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Creating Connections

While there is a great number of institutions of higher learning that offer competency-based education programs, this chapter will provide a case study approach to the offerings at Open College at Purdue University Global.

ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

Open College at Purdue University Global offers free online services and personalized mentoring to help learners identify and organize prior work and life experience and skills that could count toward a degree or move them closer to a new career. Open College at Purdue University Global is an excellent option for adult learners looking to enhance existing skills and/or complete a degree. Open College at Purdue University Global addresses a growing trend in competency-based education and the need to create affordable, flexible learning options for adult learners. Open College at Purdue University Global has reduced the economic barriers allowing individuals to pursue learning to enhance their academic and professional interests. The implications for institutions of higher education lie in establishing ways to improve access and reduce cost for individuals pursuing higher education with a design to meet academic and professional needs (Open College, Purdue University Global, 2018).

Featuring a monthly subscription-based tuition, Open College at Purdue University Global extends the current open courses offered by Purdue University Global to students who are interested in seeking a degree, as well as responds to the increasing accessibility of other open learning resources. The college is geared toward adult learners interested in a highly flexible degree and who have prior learning experience or college-level credits. Students in the college may complete a Bachelor of Science in Professional Studies (BSPr) degree.

Open College at Purdue University Global learners are encouraged to:

- Assess for their prior learning and college credit
- Define their learning goals in academic and career term
- Identify the remaining credits needed
- Find the open education resources that, coupled with Open College at Purdue University Global's support and assessment, will fill the gap toward the degree

This flexible approach to higher education aligns with the needs of adult learners who are often limited in terms of time and financial resources to complete their degree. The BSPr degree is a competency-based degree program which is a growing trend in higher education. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2017), "Competency-based strategies provide flexibility in the way that credit can be earned or awarded, and provide students with personalized learning opportunities. These strategies include online and blended learning, dual enrollment and early college high schools, project-based and community-based learning, and credit recovery, among others," (p.1). Relevancy is important to adult learners as they seek connections between the classroom and real-world experiences. "This type of learning leads to better student engagement because the content is relevant to each student and tailored to their unique needs. It also leads to better student outcomes because the pace of learning is customized to each student," (U.S. Department of Education, 2017, p.1). The "show what you know" approach to learning creates connections between experience and classroom learning.

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