

Chapter 12

Competency-Based Education (CBE) for Working Adults at Salt Lake Community College: Lessons for Large-Scale Reform

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the authors share lessons that Salt Lake Community College (SLCC), a two-year comprehensive community college located in the most urban area of the state, learned in implementing CBE. The story begins with an explanation of the organizational context for CBE reform at SLCC. As one of two 2-year colleges to join the initial group of higher education institutions in the Competency-Based Education Network (C-BEN), very quickly SLCC was thrust into the limelight as a potential leader in the newest national wave of CBE implementation. The story continues by describing full-scale implementation of CBE at SLCC funded by the United States Department of Labor Trade Adjustment Act Community College Career Training (TAACCCT) grant. Lastly, the authors highlight major lessons learned through SLCC's journey and implications for future CBE implementation that focuses on institution-wide scale up at SLCC and consider what other higher education institutions may be able to learn from SLCC's experience.

INTRODUCTION

Large-scale change is never easy and especially challenging when the change involves re-imagining the fundamental ways education works. Among several large-scale reforms being implemented in higher

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education today, competency-based education (CBE) stands out as a groundbreaking approach to innovating college curriculum. Because CBE requires replacing the conferral of credit on the basis of time to demonstrated mastery of learning irrespective of time, allowing students to complete at a faster or slower pace, it challenges how education works on the most basic level. Tried decades ago, CBE was first implemented in targeted programs – career-technical education, teacher education, and technical training – but it did not scale. However, today we’re seeing a growing number of colleges and universities across the United States adopt CBE to improve programs and student success.

In this chapter, we share lessons that Salt Lake Community College (SLCC), a two-year comprehensive community college located in the most urban area of the state, learned in implementing CBE. Our story begins with an explanation of the organizational context for CBE reform at SLCC, including SLCC’s decision to join the Competency-based Education Network (C-BEN) in 2009. As one of two 2-year colleges to join the initial group of higher education institutions in C-BEN, very quickly SLCC was thrust into the limelight as a potential leader in the newest national wave of CBE implementation. Our story continues by describing full-scale implementation of CBE at SLCC funded by the United States Department of Labor (USDOL) Trade Adjustment Act Community College Career Training (TAACCCT) grant. Our chapter concludes by highlighting major lessons learned through SLCC’s journey and implications for future CBE implementation that focuses on institution-wide scale up at SLCC and considers what other higher education institutions may be able to learn from SLCC’s experience.

THE CONTEXT FOR CBE REFORM

To understand the initial phase of CBE implementation at SLCC it is useful to recognize CBE’s roots in career-technical education (CTE). The School of Applied Technology (SAT) has a long history of offering CTE programming, explaining why several SAT faculty anticipated a relatively comfortable transition from their past teaching practice to the proposed CBE format that SLCC planned to adopt under TAACCCT. Whereas these expectations trended toward what happened, even in program areas most closely aligned to CBE, unanticipated challenges with various aspects of implementation made conversion of the SAT curriculum a complicated endeavor. Looking at the ways in which CBE and CTE have evolved, including seeing their growth and limitations, provides a useful window into understanding some aspects of how the story of CBE implementation evolved at SLCC.

Chronicling the origins of CBE in the United States, Hodge (2007) argued the CBE approach we see presented was applied in many educational arenas but one of the most relevant to today is vocational education. According to Hodge, CBE began in vocational education as a response to societal pressures for greater accountability and individualization in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s as the diversity of student populations and their resolve to change education grew. In the 1950s, following the Russian’s successful launch of Sputnik, federal funding for vocational education, later named career-technical education (CTE), grew exponentially to increase the nation’s investment in science and technological education, of which CTE was part. The growth in CTE enrollments was coupled with the need for many more teachers, also fueling the application of CBE to teacher education. Other early adopters linked to the international alert to improve science and technology included the U.S. military, an extensive experimenter in CBE that would lead to many applications in CTE as well as general education.

Behavioral psychology and systems theory were both linked to and derived from early applications of CBE context that can still be seen in modern-day applications. This includes using assessment to

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