Chapter 14
Charting the Course Ahead:
Toward a Postsecondary Competency–Based Education Research Agenda

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to encourage the expansion of research in postsecondary competency-based education (CBE) by providing specific directions for further study and outlining paths for other researchers, practitioners, and policymakers alike to inform useful research. The authors make the case that the continued development of postsecondary CBE programs relies on effective research to inform program development, growth, and expansion. In this context, the authors examine the primary audiences for research and their interests, the current barriers and enablers to conducting studies about CBE, key directions for a future research agenda, and a snapshot of what is known about those critical topics to date.

INTRODUCTION

"Institutions change more slowly than the populations they serve. Without research to support the process, the pace slows to glacial."—Julie Posselt, Associate Professor of Higher Education, University of Southern California Rossier School of Education

Competency-based education (CBE) is not necessarily new, but recently it has experienced renewed interest in both postsecondary and K–12 conversations. Its origins may stretch even further back, but vanguard institutions experimenting with postsecondary competency-based education can be traced back at least to the 1960s and 1970s and the passage of the 1965 Higher Education Act, at which point early versions of CBE programs emerged as part of federally funded grants for teacher training programs in

the United States and grants from the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education for adult learning programs (Klein-Collins, 2012; Maehl, 2000; Thackaberry, 2016; Tuxworth, 1989). At the time, much of the rationale for CBE was focused on designing programs aligned to research-informed practices for serving adult learners, including the value of articulating the purpose and performance (demonstration of competency) and acknowledging previous learning and background.

Although conversations about outcomes-based education and similar efforts periodically re-emerged in K–12 education, stakeholders in postsecondary education focused particularly on articulating learning outcomes. Renewed focus on postsecondary CBE largely came in the late 1990s, during the spread of distance education broadly, with the establishment of a high-profile, all-CBE institution, Western Governors University (Merrill, 2015). The internet, along with a growing education technology market, often are considered key enablers of important elements of competency-based education—like tracking individual progress and personalization—and may contribute to renewed interest.

In the 2000s, CBE received increased attention from policymakers and philanthropic organizations interested in looking to "new" models to help address some of the core challenges in postsecondary education. Although the interest in serving adult learners persisted, additional goals now include expanding equitable access and success for other categories of post-traditional students, potentially lowering the total cost of college for students, and improving quality (Committee on Education and the Workforce, 2017). The U.S. Department of Education's Experimental Sites aimed to test policy enablers of CBE and, in theory, to collect data about the efficacy of those changes (Cagle, 2015). By 2018, a survey by American Institutes for Research (AIR) and Eduventures indicated that at least 57 institutions were fully operating at least 512 CBE programs, and many more were in the process of implementing or interested in implementing CBE (Lurie, Mason, & Parsons, 2019).

Looking to the future, the ongoing development and success of competency-based education programs is dependent in part on the development of a strong research base that helps programs advance implementation to best serve and support students. Shifting to CBE can involve a fundamental redesign of students' learning experiences, of the institutions themselves, and even the external bodies that regulate or influence those institutions. Without research to inform, guide, and advance those efforts, institutions, policymakers, and other stakeholders are unlikely to promote responsible and effective development, monitoring, and scaling of these programs for students.

This handbook represents an important effort to collect recent advancements in research about CBE program design and implementation. This chapter aims to focus on a path forward for research on postsecondary CBE; the authors will discuss the demand for CBE research by several key audiences, articulate existing barriers to and enablers of research, and provide a snapshot of existing literature while outlining important future research directions.

THE DEMAND FOR RESEARCH: KEY AUDIENCES AND THEIR INTERESTS

A variety of audiences stand to benefit from more and better research about CBE, but each audience may have slightly different questions or needs based on their role and relationship to CBE. The following section identifies some of the primary audiences for research about CBE, specifies their role and relationship to CBE, and identifies some of the common questions and information needs they have.

Policymakers. In this case, "policymakers" are defined broadly to include all those who shape the external environment for CBE and the institutions that might offer CBE programs, including state and

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