

Chapter 9

A Competency-Based Lens for Exploring Higher Education Opportunities

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ABSTRACT

In the current fast-paced environment, learners want flexibility in timing and content as they seek relevant credentials to be successful. For institutions of higher education (IHEs) to be relevant, they must address the educational needs of learners through a strategy rooted in innovation and agility. The UW Flexible Option (Flex) is the University of Wisconsin System's implementation of competency-based education (CBE). University of Wisconsin-Parkside (UWP) has implemented the Flex Bachelor of Science in Business Administration and a certificate in Project Management that allows learners to master competencies and achieve degree completion at their own pace. This chapter describes UWP's journey, discusses a strategic framework for serving different types of learners, and suggests pathways to implement this framework through a CBE/Flex lens. It offers guidance on how IHEs can plan for the future by focusing on competencies, researching potential markets via the Ansoff Matrix, and implementing successful educational pathways for learners through partnerships.

Competency-based education (CBE) offers students potential tuition savings, the ability to “bookmark” learning, and the flexibility to progress as fast or slow through coursework as their work-life constraints permit. UW Flexible Option (Flex) is the University of Wisconsin (UW) System's implementation of CBE in Wisconsin. UW-Parkside (UWP) currently offers two Flex programs, and it is arguably one of the more accomplished institutions of higher education (IHEs) in this sector. The UW Flex Bachelor of Science in Business Administration (Flex BSBA), which transitioned to UWP in March 2019, is the first and the only CBE program accredited by the prestigious Association to Advance Collegiate Schools

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-6684-3809-1.ch009

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of Business-International (AACSB). Prior to the AACSB peer review team's visit in November 2020, Flex BSBA received two separate successful accreditation reviews from HLC (January 2019 and June 2020). A second program, the Flex Project Management Certificate for both credit-seeking and non-credit students, permits UW-Parkside to learn new use cases and innovate pathways from non-credit to credit-bearing programs. In this chapter, we summarize CBE, highlight the culture and strategy that led to CBE implementation at UWP, summarize results of these efforts, propose a framework to guide strategic thinking around CBE, and use that framework to describe UWP's plans.

The rest of this chapter is organized as follows. The next two sections describe CBE and its implementation at UW-Parkside. After this review, the chapter combines concepts from Ansoff matrix, competency frameworks, and stakeholder alliances to propose potential paths for IHE growth. Finally, we conclude the chapter with future plans at UWP and how they help serve the life-long learning needs of nontraditional students.

COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION

The U.S. Department of Education (2021) describes CBE as,

transitioning away from seat time, in favor of a structure that creates flexibility, allows students to progress as they demonstrate mastery of academic content, regardless of time, place, or pace of learning. Competency-based strategies provide flexibility in the way that credit can be earned or awarded, and provide students with personalized learning opportunities.

While this definition primarily focuses on flexibility and personalized learning from a student perspective, an operational definition of CBE from an institutional perspective is:

CBE is defined as an outcome-based approach to education that incorporates modes of instructional delivery and assessment efforts designed to evaluate mastery of learning by students through their demonstration of the knowledge, attitudes, values, skills, and behaviors required for the degree sought. (Gervais, 2016, p. 99)

In other words, students advance in CBE when they master the competencies associated with a class regardless of the time it takes to master these competencies, while institutions design competencies, content, and support structures for students to succeed. The Society of Human Resource Management (SHRM, 2021) defines competency as:

A cluster of highly interrelated attributes, including knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) that give rise to the behaviors needed to perform a given job effectively. Competencies can be either technical or behavioral. Technical competencies reflect the knowledge required to perform a specific role. Behavioral competencies describe the KSAs that facilitate the application of technical knowledge to job-related behavior.

CBE in the UW System was motivated in 2011 by discussions between then-Governor Scott Walker and then-UW System President Kevin Reilly. What would become UW Extended Campus, then a divi-

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