

Chapter 10

Competency-Based Education: The Future of Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

This chapter will review what competency-based education is and how delivering traditional educational credentials and degrees in a non-traditional, non-term program can better engage students and promote their success in the new higher educational market. It will discuss how the CBE model can benefit students, especially non-traditional populations. Students can leverage this type of “just in time” flexible education to obtain credentials, degrees, and certificates needed to meet professional goals and career requirements in the current job market. The chapter will summarize some of the common challenges administrators can face while administering CBE programs related to information technology barriers, student retention and motivation, and faculty perception and make recommendations for addressing these challenges. This discussion will better-prepare institutions of higher education in creating and implementing their own CBE programs.

The current state of affairs within the higher education industry is under intense scrutiny. Tuition increases have fueled a \$1.5 trillion student loan debt crisis (Goldrick-Rab & Steinbaum, 2020), six-year completion rates are at a dismal 62%, the highest they have reached in years (NSC Blog, 2022), and enrollment rates have continued to drop by 2.6% annually since 2010 (Hanson, 2021; Saul, 2022). In fact, enrollment has declined by a staggering 6.6% since fall 2019 (Saul, 2022). Furthermore, the higher education system, in its current state, has landed the United States 12th in world rankings when it comes to undergraduate degree attainment for the 25–34-year-old demographic (OECD Data, n.d.).

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Another piece to this puzzle is the shifting demographic of today's college students. The average age of a full-time student enrolled in an undergraduate program is 21.8 years old. The average age of a part-time student is 27.2, and over half (52%) of the university students in the United States are 20 years old or older (Hanson, 2021). As the market shifts, innovative approaches, such as competency-based education, are being explored that allow students choices on how to receive their post-secondary education.

Competency-based Education (CBE) models are gaining traction in the higher education sector because of the flexible alternative pathway they provide to earning a college degree. Although the first higher education CBE models appeared in the 1970s, there were still only twenty documented CBE programs in the United States by 2012 (Gallagher, 2014; Krauss, 2017). Despite their slow start, CBE programs increased exponentially by 2017 to over five hundred programs. In fact, the US Department of Education Undersecretary at the time, Ted Mitchell, described CBE as “the single-most important innovation in higher education” (Krauss, 2017).

In a study conducted by the American Institutes for Research (AIR), Mason et al. (2021) completed three annual surveys from 2018 – 2020 and compiled a report titled, *State of the Field: Findings from the 2020 National Survey of Postsecondary Competency-Based Education*. The mission of the project was to gain an understanding and track perceptions of CBE, interest in CBE, implementation, and adoption progress. The researchers of this study highlighted two key takeaways among the many findings. First, while barriers remain, such as internal business processes and costs and external regulation, respondents remain optimistic about the future of CBE. Additionally, the number of CBE programs continued to grow despite the COVID-19 disruptions. In fact, report findings show COVID-19 may have had an influence on institutional interests in CBE in some cases.

Although CBE lacks a universal definition within the higher education industry, the most often cited definition is that from the Competency-Based Education Network (C-BEN) (n.d.):

Competency-based education combines an intentional and transparent approach to curricular design with an academic model in which the time it takes to demonstrate competencies varies and the expectations about learning are held constant. Students acquire and demonstrate their knowledge and skills by engaging in learning exercises, activities, and experiences that align with clearly defined programmatic outcomes. Students receive proactive guidance and support from faculty and staff. Learners earn credentials by demonstrating mastery through multiple forms of assessment, often at a personalized pace.

Despite the lack of an industry-wide definition, there are five hallmarks among competency-based programs, alluded to in the above C-BEN definition, as well as outlined by Bushway et al. (2018). These hallmarks include a focus on learning (rather than time spent in a classroom), a required demonstration of mastery of all course material, a rigorous assessment process to determine a student's mastery of material, a focus on the learner's journey that is guided by faculty throughout the educational experience, and, lastly, a flexible, self-paced environment allowing students to move as quickly or as slowly as they need to demonstrate competence in the material (Bushway et al., 2018). Institutions interested in offering a competency-based model to education will need to consider these hallmarks and the barriers associated with each when outlining their implementation strategy.

This chapter will review what competency-based education is and how delivering traditional educational credentials and degrees in a non-traditional, non-term program can better engage students and promote their success in the new higher educational market. It will cover a brief history of CBE and its growth in higher education and discuss how the CBE model can benefit students, especially non-traditional

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