Competency-based Education

Definition: Competency-based education measures learning rather than seat time. Students progress by proving that they have mastered the knowledge and skills (called competencies) required for a particular course, regardless of how long it takes. This is in contrast to traditional models that can and often do measure competency, but are time-based -- courses last about four months, and students may advance only after they have put in the seat time. This is true even if they could have completed the coursework and passed the final exam in half the time. So, while traditional institutions hold time requirements constant and let learning vary, competency-based learning holds learning constant and lets time vary.

Degree Program Models

- Western Governors University (UT) – competency-based, online degree programs. Technology does the teaching and students advance based on their mastery of content as opposed to the amount of time spent in a course. Currently, WGU maps its competency-based degrees back to credit hours versus relying only on direct assessment, in part because of worries about whether employers and accreditors would accept direct-assessment competency-based degrees.

- Southern New Hampshire University (NH) – In January 2013, Southern New Hampshire plans to begin offering competency-based associate degrees in general studies. Several other competency-based programs will follow, including bachelor’s degrees. The program, dubbed Pathways during the development phase, will be called College for America when it goes live.

- Excelsior College (NY) - associate degree in nursing is fully assessment-based, however, a pre-requisite for admission to the program is prior clinical experience.

Competency Frameworks within Traditional Course-Based (credit hour) Programs

Definition: Students take the same kinds of courses that have always been offered by colleges and universities: instructor-led and credit-hour (i.e. time) based. These may be offered on campus or off, in the classroom or online, accelerated or normally paced. Institutions define competencies that are expected of graduates, and students demonstrate these competencies by successfully completing courses that relate to the required competencies. In some cases, institutions embed competency assessments into each course.

- Alverno College (WI) – competency assessment is built into courses; credit hour maintained (holds time requirements constant and lets learning vary).

- Brandman University formerly, Chapman University (CA) – competency assessment is built into courses; credit hour maintained (holds time requirements constant and lets learning vary).

Prior Learning Assessment

- Marylhurst University (OR) - competency requirements that students can satisfy through assessments rather than through courses.

Academic Support for Traditional Classroom-based Learning

- Tusculum College (TN) – assesses established course learning outcomes in general core required courses; uses results to inform/strengthen curriculum and instruction; not tied to student “graduation”.

- Carnegie Mellon University (PA) - Open Learning Initiative: free (or low cost) courses designed with learning activities dispersed throughout the content. After a new idea or concept is introduced, students have opportunities to apply what they have read, receive immediate feedback, and test their understanding, thus increasing self-awareness of their learning progress. Can be used by current students to enhance class-based instruction and mastery of content or by independent learners not enrolled. Courses do not count for credit or lead to a certificate or degree.