

Putting the Pieces in Place: Launching a Competency-Based Program

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Launching innovative programming is a challenge, especially when those offerings differ in almost every way from a traditional, semester-based course or program. An innovative mindset and a problem-solving attitude must be at the forefront of working through those challenges. *Demand for competency-based*

education is growing nationwide, as employers and students are looking for more concrete mechanisms to earn and display specific skills and capabilities. These programs are characterized by personalization, adaptability and are more focused on subject mastery than seat-time—which creates some challenges when trying to implement these programs within the structure of a traditional postsecondary institution. In this interview, Laurie Dodge reflects on the thinking behind launching competency-based education (CBE) at Brandman University, and shares some insights on what it took to launch the innovative offering.

The EvoLLLution (Evo): Why was it important for Brandman to buck higher education’s status quo to find new approaches to delivering degree programming?

Laurie Dodge (LD): The landscape of higher education is changing. Jobs require more education. By 2020, 65 percent of all jobs in the economy will require postsecondary education and training beyond high school (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2013 Recovery: Job Growth & Education Requirements Through 2020).

College student demographics are changing. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2015), 74 percent of today’s undergraduate students have at least one non-traditional characteristic:

- 28 percent have at least one dependent
- 62 percent work either full or part time
- 43 percent attend part time
- 63 percent are first-generation students

Nearly half of first-year students live at or at below poverty level. And there is a growing number of students of color with a substantial 240-percent growth of Hispanic students attending college (Lumina Foundation, comparison 1996-2010).

Technology is now an integral part of student learning. The advancements in technology have advanced to adaptive learning, simulations, and anytime, anywhere learning on all devices. The emerging digital infrastructure allows students to learn at their own pace and have customized quality learning experiences.

It is within these changing trends that Brandman University decided to “buck” higher education’s status quo utilizing technology-smart, state-of-art learning

experiences that are student-centric through their competency-based Brandman MyPath programs. Currently, Brandman University has two direct assessment CBE programs: a bachelor of business administration with five emphasis areas and a bachelor of information technology program.

Evo: What were some of the most significant challenges you and your colleagues encountered launching robust CBE programming at Brandman, and how did you overcome these obstacles?

LD: Before we jump to the challenges, I would like to share the most exciting part of building a CBE program. All of Brandman MyPath programs were created through a backward design approach. With backward design faculty focused on the student learning outcomes and assessment first and then built the academic learning journey.

Brandman University utilized relevant frameworks to build their programs such as the Degree Qualification Profile for 21st-century skills, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) Essential Learning Outcomes, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Occupational Information Network (O*NET) Data, and Burning Glass Technologies' Labor Insights. Based on the data-mining and aggregation of knowledge, skills and abilities from these frameworks, the Brandman faculty created high-quality and relevant competency statements and supporting learning objectives. To create a degree from scratch based on this rich evidence was a field day for faculty and instructional designers supporting this work. All of this good collaborative work is the marrying of the data from industry subject matter experts with faculty-driven best pedagogical approaches in teaching and learning to ensure Brandman University's coursework is high quality and relevant for the continuously changing demands of a highly-skilled workforce.

Back to your original question though about challenges. Brandman University's most significant challenge was addressing the multitude of business processes essential to launching a robust CBE program. Brandman MyPath students can start their program any week and can work at their own pace. To address this flexible option for students, Brandman needed to switch to a new financial aid solution/software that could accommodate both our Brandman MyPath students and our credit-hour programs. It is essential that Brandman MyPath students are truly self-paced with the "any day of the week start" and ability to progress (start and finish) at a learning rate that works for them. For example, a student with

work experience in accounting may complete competencies related to accounting knowledge, skills and abilities at a relatively fast pace. This student, however, may need additional time and progress at a slower rate in other content areas such as writing. Brandman needed to build business processes to ensure students are able to set their own start date and rate of learning across the program.

Business processes are needed for all parts of a student's lifecycle from recruitment to graduation. Every step of the way, Brandman University developed solutions to accommodate CBE such as student billing, financial aid disbursement, enrollment in competencies, and transcribing.

To overcome these obstacles, the business operations staff and administrators meet weekly to address challenges as they arise. The business operations community chaired by Brandman University Executive Vice Chancellor of Finance and Administration (CFO) includes staff from the offices of financial aid, admissions, student support services, registrar, business office, academic affairs, institutional research, advising, outreach, and information technology. It is essential that this wide-breadth of personnel be in the same place to discuss challenges as they arise in real-time. One fix in one department may incur an issue in another department.

For example, in building the Brandman MyPath program, the faculty with support of the deans and provost determined that traditional grades (A, B, C, D, F) would not be given to Brandman MyPath students. Because CBE programs focus on mastery of student learning, when a Brandman MyPath student achieves mastery of a competency, they receive the letter grade "M" indicating mastery. This new way of grading then has to be built in the student information system and degree audit for financial aid and for transcribing. IT needed to build a middle-ware solution to knit together the student information system (SIS) with the learning management system (Sagence Learning) with the financial aid and business offices. Not to overuse the term, but it does take a village.

Universities and colleges do not know what challenges are around the corner, so having regular meetings of a wide range of expertise truly permits finding reasonable and effective solutions.

Evo: In your opinion, what are a few key characteristics that identify an institution or division that's open to creativity and innovation?

LD: Creativity and innovation is the ability to have an opportunistic mindset (see the sky) while being well grounded (planted and solid). It is envisioning something new and being able to execute the idea to success.

If 100 people were asked what the key characteristics that identify an institution that is open to creativity and innovation, there would be 100 different answers, no doubt. Based on my experience at Brandman University and working with other institutions here is what rises to the top in my view.

1. *A solid foundation of success.* An institution that is grounded has a history of making proven strategic decisions. This institution can more easily pursue innovative ideas without huge risks to the institution. Plus, the institution has likely figured out how to execute new initiatives.
2. *A culture of origination.* An institution that has an institutional culture of origination is well poised for continued creativity and innovation. Brandman University's vision to "be the recognized leader in the evolution of adult learning" has created and continues to strategically guide the culture of origination.
3. *Senior leadership commitment.* Creative and innovative enterprises require institutional staff and faculty, financial resources and time. Before a creative idea can be fully executed it can die on the vine by pulling back the resources too soon. If institutional senior leadership and the board is committed to the new project, they can ride out the storm of challenges along the way, being full aware that it may take more time and money to come to full fruition.
4. *Flexibility and Openness.* When staff, faculty, and administrators are being presented with a new idea, what is their first response? "We don't have time or money for that. We already have too much going on." Or is the response "Let's look into that. Let's get a group together and explore this." This is more of a general feeling across the university and does not need to pertain to all staff. But for the seed of creativity and innovation to have a chance to grow, the first step to explore and learn more gives it a chance.
5. *Evidence-based approach.* An institution that has thoroughly researched creative and innovative ideas will help develop essential components of the project. Learning from what other institutions have done in similar projects will also assist in avoiding errors. This evidence-based approach is also needed for building the business plan.

Evo: What advice would you share with other leaders trying to get an innovative approach to programming off the ground at their own institution?

LD: To execute an innovative approach at your institution, my advice first and foremost is to know and honor your institutional culture. Think about previous initiatives and how they were approached at your institution. Is there a particular school, college, dean or faculty member who may be a good place to start?

Be aware of challenges and roadblocks and take time to talk through these. It depends on the innovative approach but it may be helpful to start with a SWOT analysis that all key members participate in. This analysis will help you see obvious and the not-so-obvious barriers. It is better to know these ahead of time and build in time to address each of these.

At times it is also helpful to have experts from outside of the institution present ideas. Or it might be helpful to have key faculty leaders team with an expert for a presentation of a new innovative approach. Again, it depends on your institutional culture and past experience of implementing innovative approaches at your institution.

And take the time needed in the very beginning stages of an innovative project or idea. What is the problem you are trying to solve? Are there other options? Who should be in this circle to start the discussion? It is essential to really think through what your hopes and aspirations are for this new innovation at your institution.

And lastly, you need at least one and maybe up to three key leaders for building and execution of creative and innovative projects. Each person will have their own area of expertise and this lead team will need to collaborate and work in sync to get the program off the ground and to keep it going.

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