



Better Data on Competency-Based Education

More information about what works in competency-based programs is needed to inform policy and encourage the growth of this promising form of postsecondary education, writes Charla Long.

By [Charla Long](#)

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College and university leaders continue to show great enthusiasm for competency-based learning. They believe it can address some of higher education's most pernicious challenges: rising costs, shifting demographics and a tenuous connection between education and career. So it's no surprise that a recent [national survey](#) found that a majority of institutions were interested in or adopting competency-based education.

Nevertheless, in practice, the approach remains isolated and limited in scope, with just one in 10 of the institutions surveyed meeting the threshold for actually offering a competency-based education (CBE) program. Nationwide, that equates to just 600 colleges and universities offering some form of CBE. But even those numbers belie the fact that far fewer institutions offer the most progressive form -- direct assessment -- which completely separates learning from the arbitrary constraints of seat time.

The reason for the disconnect, all too often, is uncertainty.

Institutional leaders see CBE, especially programs that are untethered from time, as risky. Perhaps with good reason: the field has precious little evidence about best practices and student outcomes with CBE programs. That lack of data not only stymies the efforts of "intrapreneurs," but also chills support from policy makers who want to know whether CBE is working and are -- with good reason -- guarded in their efforts to shift policy or funding dynamics in the absence of better evidence.

Now is an especially critical time, as Congress, through the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, and the U.S. Department of Education are rethinking a host of policies and regulations that have a direct impact on the structure and growth of CBE. A negotiated rule-making panel brought together by the Education Department, for example, has recommended changes to the

federal financial aid process and other regulations that would potentially expand access to CBE programs. Notably, the panel recommended that the department allow institutions to offer hybrid programs that let students combine CBE with credit-hour courses -- potentially dramatically expanding the pool of students for whom CBE would work.

Amid such possible shifts, we need far more information about what works in order to inform both institutional practice and federal policy. That starts with creating transparency for students, faculty members and policy makers -- but it also requires an embrace of standards that can provide higher education stakeholders with a common yardstick.

In August, an early pioneer in competency-based learning added to that body of evidence, releasing one of the field's [first reports](#) on the outcomes and implications of their work.

Capella University was the first institution approved by the U.S. Department of Education to offer financial aid for direct assessment programs at the bachelor's and master's levels. It also is the first to embrace such a framework for measurement -- which offers the field an unprecedented insight into not just outcomes, but also critical lessons learned from the first five years of offering direct assessment through its model (called FlexPath).

Specifically, the university's report shows that direct assessment bachelor's and master's programs are delivering on many of the promises of CBE -- speeding time to degree, reducing cost and increasing flexibility for students, all without sacrificing quality. It also shares challenges and critical lessons that other institutions can learn from.

To my mind, the most heartening news is that Capella University's direct assessment programs have produced 5,000 graduates in just five years, and 7,000 students are currently enrolled. Those graduates, on average, moved more quickly through their programs, were charged less in tuition and borrowed less than those in similar credit-hour programs. Many of those learners would have never made their way to -- and through -- higher education if they did not have the flexibility that direct assessment provides. This shows that, with the right structure, CBE programs can grow beyond a niche to expand access for a relatively large number of students. Other early findings from a handful of institutions -- such as Sinclair Community College in Dayton, Ohio -- are also promising. Students in competency-based education programs at Sinclair earn credentials at a rate 15 percent higher and 35 percent faster than their counterparts in traditional programs.

The Competency-Based Education Network has developed a [quality framework for CBE programs](#), which ensures that quality academics go hand in hand with improved outcomes around completion, speed and cost. Our organization has conducted a number of quality-assurance reviews using this framework, and insights from those reviews and from high-quality pioneers, like Capella, are helping to identify replicable best practices for the field, which are shared at conferences such as [CBExchange](#). A demonstration project, which is being considered as part of the Higher Education Act reauthorization, would allow us to gather even more data and refine our framework.

As Congress and the Education Department consider how to reshape our higher education system for the future, it is essential that those debates, and the ultimate policy changes, be informed by robust information on student outcomes.

We need far more information about what works and what doesn't in competency-based education. We have the tools, and in many cases the data already exist. The challenge is getting more institutions to share. Doing so is essential to achieving educational excellence -- and ultimately helping thousands, even millions, more Americans succeed.

Bio

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Read more by [Charla Long](#)

https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2019/12/05/essay-need-better-data-what-works-competency-based-education?utm_source=Inside+Higher+Ed&utm_campaign=3fa2b1347d-WNU_COPY_02&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_1fcbc04421