

# INSIDE HIGHER ED

## Slow and Steady for Competency-Based Education

While competency-based education is spreading gradually, interest and optimism about it remain high, and experts say careful growth is best.

By [Paul Fain](#)

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Competency-based education has spread slower than many expected, particularly given hype in recent years about its approach, which emphasizes what students know and can do, tends to be more focused on employer

needs, and often features elements of personalization and self-pacing for students.

Yet the results of a [broad new survey](#) on the emerging form of postsecondary education found continued interest from colleges, expanding experimentation with mostly small degree programs and plenty of optimism about competency-based education's promise.

"We're seeing growth, but not seeing exponentially crazy growth," said Amy Laitinen, director for higher education at New America's education policy program.

That's not a bad thing, however, said Laitinen, an expert on policy issues relevant to competency-based education, including the [credit-hour standard](#). She said early-adopter colleges are a "group of actors doing this well and who are committed to not cutting corners" or pursuing growth in ways that could harm students. "It's harder to do quality programs."

The American Institutes for Research and Eduventures co-led the survey, which was released last week and received funding from the Lumina Foundation and Ellucian, a software and higher education services company. The results build on a more stripped-down [2016 survey](#) of 251 institutions on issues around competency-based education. The latest version was conducted last year and yielded responses from administrators at 501 institutions across most sectors of higher education, including research universities, for-profits and community colleges. It is the largest such survey to date, and AIR plans to expand on it with future editions during the next three years.

Among respondents, 57 colleges reported currently operating at least one competency-based credential, for a combined total of 512 programs -- 427 at the undergraduate level and 85 graduate ones. The highest concentrations of programs were in nursing and computer science.

In addition, 430 institutions reported being either interested in adopting competency-based education or in the process of creating a program. The survey also found that, among respondents with one in place or in the process of at least adopting core elements of a program, 52 percent were public institutions, 42 percent private nonprofit and 5 percent for-profit.

“It’s growing thoughtfully and carefully,” Laitinen said of the field, “and that’s what we need.”

## **Competency-Based Learning and CBE**

Defining what constitutes as a true competency-based program can be a challenge.

Some colleges essentially have just taken learning requirements for courses and programs (so-called learning outcomes) and rebranded them as competencies. Meanwhile, Southern New Hampshire University’s College for America, Capella University, the University of Wisconsin System and a handful of other institutions have received approval from accreditors and the federal government to offer an aggressive form of competency-based education called direct assessment, which is completely untethered from the credit hour.

“There’s a lot huddling under the umbrella of CBE,” said Kelle Parsons, a research at AIR and one of the report’s co-authors.

The new survey's threshold for classification as competency-based education was whether an entire program contained at least one of these characteristics:

- Learning measured in competencies, and either quantified without reference to seat time or mapped to measures of seat time;
- Students advance through programs based on mastering all required competencies;
- Courses or programs feature substantial self-pacing by students.

Western Governors University is by far the biggest competency-based institution and one of the nation's largest universities, enrolling more than 100,000 students. Others, including College for America and Capella, enroll several thousand but are part of universities that enroll many more students in traditional credential tracks. And most of the competency-based programs the survey identified are on the boutique side.

For example, more than half of the survey's responding institutions (53 percent) reported undergraduate enrollments of fewer than 50 students in competency-based programs. Just 4 percent of colleges reported enrollments of more than 1,000 students.

Likewise, the survey found that many colleges were using a variety of elements associated with competency-based education but not fully adopting a program -- an approach sometimes called competency-based learning. And many of those early steps, such as writing definitions of competencies at the course or program levels, did not independently reach the survey's threshold. "Most institutions are sticking a toe in the water," said Charla Long, executive director of the Competency-Based Education Network, a national consortium of institutions. "They're doing CBE-esque stuff rather than full programs."

Long said many colleges are trying to make a safe bet by starting small and then expanding course offerings and programs if they work. While that caution may be warranted (more on that later), she said colleges don't get the full payoff from competency-based education by picking and choosing pieces of it.

"It takes the totality to really realize the benefits," said Long.

In addition, she said the field's slow, piecemeal development can discourage education technology companies from investing in platforms for competency-based programs, and can diminish urgency around policy fixes that could help providers.

"We still need technology to be developed. We still need regulatory changes to keep up," Long said.

## **Risks and Rewards**

Colleges face a wide range of challenges when seeking to create competency-based programs, the survey found. And they have struggled previously with mixed messages from federal policy makers and accreditors about the delivery model, particularly more expansive versions like direct assessment.

More than half of the survey's respondents cited federal student aid regulations, institutional business processes and start-up costs as key barriers to adoption. And 57 percent of respondents who said they were interested in competency-based education but had not yet begun to create a program cited a lack of on-campus expertise as a barrier.

Many colleges are resigned about problems around the application of financial aid to competency-based programs, said Howard Lurie, principal analyst of online and continuing education at Eduventures and a co-author of the report. That's partly because of snags due to the programs' nonstandard academic calendars and approach with the credit hour.

In addition, a [2016 report](#) by a consulting firm questioned the business models of many smaller competency-based programs, such as pricing that does not adequately account for a lack of scale.

Just as important, accreditors at times have scrutinized proposed programs closely. The cautionary approach from accreditors was partially a response to [critical audits](#) by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Inspector General, which also [criticized the model](#) of Western Governors. (The department [recently disagreed](#) with the audit's finding.)

That tension is part of the broader balancing act between innovation and consumer protection, Lurie said. "CBE gets played out in the context of that balance."

Federal negotiators currently are trying to thread that needle as part of a wide-ranging [negotiated rule making](#) on innovation in higher education. The Trump administration has cited a desire to help spur the growth of competency-based education as being behind some of its most aggressive and controversial proposals for negotiators, including a call to revisit the credit-hour standard and requirements for "regular and substantive" interaction between faculty members and students in online programs.

Laitinen warned of the risks deregulation without adequate safeguards could pose, for students and taxpayers as well as for competency-based education

itself. If the movement becomes associated with an innovation push that turns out to be a ploy for a federal money grab by low-quality providers, she said, “There will be a regulatory backlash so fast.”

The report’s co-authors and Long agreed with Laitinen’s assessment.

“It’s a real balance between what’s in the best interests of an individual [CBE provider] and what’s in the best interest of the field,” said Long.

But the biggest risk, she said, might come from institutions that enter the space after regulations are dropped or weakened. “Would new actors continue to have that commitment without the regs?”

Yet despite the many risks and challenges competency-based education faces, most colleges remain optimistic about the future of competency-based education.

Fully three-quarters of respondents said they expect the number of competency-based programs to increase during the next five years. And among respondents with existing programs at their institution, 83 percent predicted that those programs would increase during the same time period.

The attraction is clear, said Lurie.

“CBE remains a compelling, learning-centric way of reaching people who’ve been left behind by higher education,” he said. “This is really hard to do. But that’s why it’s worth doing.”

*Read more by [Paul Fain](#)*

<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2019/01/28/slow-growth-competency-based-education-survey-finds-interest-and-optimism-about-it>