

BRIEF

Capella U shares lessons from 5 years of competency-based education

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Dive Brief:

- Capella University offers a look at the first five years of its direct assessment competency-based education program (CBE), FlexPath, in a report released Thursday that includes lessons learned so far and barriers to broader implementation of the model throughout higher ed.
- FlexPath participants finish bachelor's degrees 59% faster and master's degrees 42% faster than students in similar credit-hour programs, and they borrow 45% less financial aid than those in Capella's equivalent credit-hour programs. They also persist over two years at higher rates.
- The data comes as regulators consider rules that intend to make it easier for colleges to explore alternative educational models and as a growing number of colleges adopt or express interest in CBE.

Dive Insight:

Capella was one of the first colleges to get the U.S. Department of Education's approval to run CBE programs. Through the direct-assessment method, FlexPath gauges students' progress based on measures such as exams, papers and projects, rather than time.

Advocates say such a model allows students to work more quickly through material they are comfortable with and slow down when they need to spend more time on a topic. This can be especially

helpful for adult learners, who require more schedule flexibility than traditional college students, the report notes.

While a growing number of colleges say they are using or are interested in CBE, many are still in the early stages of launching a program. Of 501 colleges surveyed recently by the American Institutes for Research and Eduventures, just over half (57%) that said they were in the process of rolling out CBE programs were still in the planning phase, while only 11% said they had an entire program using CBE.

Respondents said challenges to uptake include regulations that govern which programs are eligible for Title IV funding and other institutional initiatives taking priority. Questions about promised student outcomes also linger, given the limited use of CBE in postsecondary education.

Other challenges to CBE include a financial aid system that currently tracks students' progress and issues disbursements according to a time-based academic model, said Jillian Klein, vice president of government and regulatory affairs for Capella's parent company, Strategic Education Inc., during an event Wednesday morning in Washington to discuss the research.

Possible changes in rules that spell out what counts as regular and substantive distance education stand to impact CBE because many of those programs are offered online, Julie Peller, executive director of Higher Learning Advocates, told Education Dive in an interview.

CBE requires a unique approach. "A lot of the changes and desires to think differently and critically about how to define what it means for a substantive and good academic interaction needs to be thought through differently for CBE," she said, noting that the Education Department is limited in how it can address those differences through regulation. Creating a separate definition of CBE in a reauthorization of the Higher Education Act would offer more flexibility.

"There still, from a regulation perspective, needs to be some experimentation and more larger-scale testing before we write in stone what those rules are for CBE," she said. That includes finding an alternative measure to the credit hour.

FlexPath's first five years also revealed operational considerations for implementing CBE. For instance, Klein said, although Capella officials initially thought a completely disaggregated faculty model would work best, they found students were confused, particularly early on, about which instructional team members to refer to about what. She said it's too soon to tell whether a disaggregated model is the right approach.

Looking ahead, the ultimate outcome for CBE would be allowing students to pick a mix of direct assessment and credit-hour programs based on what they think their learning needs will be in those subjects. "That's likely where we would see a sort of sweet spot," she said.

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