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How online competency-based education can enable greater access to higher education

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1 | INTRODUCTION

The landscape of higher education in the United States has been transformed in recent decades by disruptive changes, such as for-profit universities, online education, an aging workforce, funding decreases, and tuition increases. According to Rubin (2013), higher education institutions' costs continue to rise while state funding is being reduced. As a result, most schools have raised tuition significantly in recent years. As the costs continue to climb, a traditional college education becomes unaffordable for more students (Christensen & Eyring, 2011). Clearly, the rising cost of higher education is becoming a larger burden in need of attention. Institutions must find ways to control their costs or tuition will continue to rise and higher education will be less accessible. "Mere budget cutting will not be enough. For the vast majority of institutions, fundamental change is essential" (Christensen & Eyring, 2011, p. 50). According to Johnstone and Soares (2014), an affordable college education is the answer to economic competitiveness and individuals' personal success.

Despite the rising costs of higher education, Zumeta, Breneman, Callan, and Finney (2012) identify that the US economy desperately needs significantly more college graduates than what is currently being produced. The average debt accumulated by students has ballooned to $37,172 for students who graduated in 2016 (Student Loan Hero, 2017). Although the cost of a college degree is higher than ever before, there does not appear to be any viable alternative for students to gain an education or comparable experience without accumulating record debt. Zumeta et al. (2012) encapsulate part of the reason for this by stating:

> While practical job experience certainly remains important in the modern workplace, formal education plays an increasing role not only because of the knowledge, skills, and credentials it imparts but also because it enables people to learn more efficiently, whether in formal training or, increasingly, on their own. Most analysts agree that the trend of recent decades for the labor market to reward increased levels of worker education will continue for the foreseeable future.
>
> (p. 4)

In addition, Zumeta et al. (2012) highlight the fact that today's workforce needs to be able to learn and use new technologies, have problem-solving skills, and have more diverse knowledge than ever before. Johnstone and Soares (2014) express that there is a current gap between college graduates' skills and what employers are demanding. Given these needs, opportunities exist for models of higher education which are more accessible to the underserved portions of the population that are still not receiving the necessary education and/or skills to participate in the workforce.

One of the major underserved populations in the United States is the nontraditional adult learner (NAL). Chen (2017) states that despite the fact that approximately 38% of postsecondary learners are NALs, current efforts largely fall short of meeting their needs and treat NALs as having "secondary student status" within the institution. Chen (2017) also argues that despite the need for NALs to be educated for the workforce, institutions largely focus improvement efforts on items that privilege traditional-aged students, with the exception of expanded online offerings. For example, it is common for institutions to spend millions improving residence and dining halls, fitness centers, and other structures that largely support traditional-aged students' lifestyles.

Rubin (2013) states that state governments have begun to put pressure on universities to change by focusing on improving access to education and leveraging the benefits of online learning. Given

the challenges universities face in meeting enrollment targets and balancing the budget, tremendous opportunities exist for schools to address NAL and other students' needs in order to provide a diversified enrollment stream. Chen (2017) argues that competency-based education (CBE) is a good fit for NALs because of its flexibility. Online CBE programs can provide NALs and other learners with flexible programming and self-paced learning many desire. In addition, the model can also lessen time to complete a degree and therefore lower the total cost of a degree for students. CBE appears to not only be a valid, flexible, cost-saving option for students, but it also presents attractive financial advantages for higher education institutions as well.

2 | ONLINE COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION

Competency-based education is defined by Kelchen (2015) as "a form of higher education in which credit is provided on the basis of student learning rather than credit or clock hours" (p. ii). This model has recently exploded in popularity and is the focus of institutions seeking to innovate their educational offering and policymakers seeking to reform higher education. In CBE, students can take the amount of time they need to master a specific competency. Students typically demonstrate their mastery of a competency through projects (Krause, Dias, & Schedler, 2015) or exams. The competencies are typically established through partnerships with industry experts and employers, which build a bridge between the educational world and the "real world," or the workplace (Hill, 2012; Johnstone & Soares, 2014).

According to Chen (2017), CBE has been around since at least the 1970s but has recently resurged in the form of online CBE. Christensen and Eyring (2011) note that more students are deciding to enroll in online education than ever before. Not all students want the campus living experience, and more students are choosing the convenience and cost savings of living at home, taking classes online on their own schedule, and having the option to work a job at the same time (Christensen & Eyring, 2011). In addition, Hill (2012) suggests that online education should be utilized to create lower cost structures for higher education institutions. As online education continues to boom, institutions have begun to leverage its advantages and pair it with the advantages of CBE. Some of the biggest institutions in the online CBE space are Western Governors University, Northern Arizona University, Southern New Hampshire University, and the University of Wisconsin (Kelchen, 2015). The vast majority of students entering into CBE programs are age 25 or older (Kelchen, 2016).

2.1 | Flexibility of programming

Competency-based education has the potential to lower the cost of college and better serve adult learners who seek flexibility in their educational programming (Kelchen, 2015). Chen (2017) believes that because NALs and other students are often juggling competing pressures in their personal, professional, and academic lives, the CBE model allows the flexibility these students desire in an educational program. Institutions would be wise to explore CBE as an option to increase their enrollment by filling the need for flexible coursework than many adult and nontraditional learners desire.

2.2 | Reduced completion time through self-paced learning

One of the most disruptive components of CBE is that it is not tied to student seat time (Chen, 2017). According to Kelchen (2015):

> Competency-based education has the potential to streamline the path to a college degree for a significant number of students, both working adults who can apply their skills and experiences to earn credit for what they already know and other students who prefer self-paced learning over the traditional time-based model of earning credits.
>
> (p. 16)

In the CBE model, demonstration of mastery is what is important and the time it takes to do so is irrelevant (Chen, 2017). Chen (2017) also states, "Research has consistently shown that time spent in the classroom does not equate to actual learning" (p. 6). In CBE, students focus on the mastery of a particular competency (goal, outcome, or objective) before they can move on to the next competency.

> Unlike online college courses, which often leave the basic semester long structure intact, competency-based models award credit based on student learning, not time spent in class. As soon as a student can prove mastery of a particular set of competencies, he or she is free to move on to the next set.
>
> (Kelchen, 20162, p. i)

Pacing is dictated not by how long a course is said to run (i.e., 15 weeks), but instead by how fast or slow a student demonstrates mastery of the predetermined competencies. As a result, students can take courses at their own pace and finish their degree in less time, avoiding both the real costs (fees, housing, etc.) of the additional year, as well as the opportunity costs of not being able to work in their desired field or move on to additional education (Kelchen, 2015). Kelchen (2015) also states that some programs offer a subscription model where students pay a set price for an "all you can learn" experience during a period of time. This can effectively allow students who desire to progress through programs quickly to pay less per class if they can finish many of them in an "all you can learn" period.

2.2.1 | PLAs

In some programs, prior learning assessments (PLAs) can allow students to demonstrate prior learning and receive credit for a course they had not yet taken. For example, employees who have worked their way up in an organization may already have basic communication and teamwork skills that they can easily demonstrate. In many CBE programs, instead of students having to take courses on skills they clearly already have, they can earn credits via a PLA and not have to spend time in a class with competencies they have already mastered. This again can reduce students' costs by lessening their time to degree completion, and the institution can still receive revenue for the credits the student is earning.

2.3 | Scalability of online CBE

"Higher education is clearly important to individuals as well as to the labor force. However, it needs to become more efficient and effective" (Rubin, 2013, p. 2). By focusing on the demonstration of mastery, students in CBE programs can demonstrate the effectiveness of their education. On the efficiency end, the online component allows institutions to reach a much larger number of learners, including the subset of learners who could otherwise not attend college because they could not make it to campus. The scalability of online CBE addresses the need for institutions to become more efficient.

It has no secret that schools have been hesitant to explore alternative forms of education in the past; however, the financial climate of higher education necessitates disruptive change. Zumeta et al. (2012) state:

> Institutions and their faculties, especially four-year colleges and universities, have also generally been unenthusiastic about exploring ways in which new instructional technologies might be used to make instruction more efficient as opposed to simply adding on the technology to existing instructional costs.
>
> (p. 25)

Opportunities exist to use technology to deliver a different form of education than what is being produced in lecture halls. Leveraging the internet to deliver online CBE programs and disaggregating faculty roles to provide just-in-time support at lower costs allows institutions to effectively scale online CBE courses. Following this model, schools can have many students in one course without degrading the educational experience. In the online CBE model, students can be in courses with many other learners while still enjoying a personalized learning experience.

2.4 | Online CBE concerns and issues

Although online CBE presents obvious benefits to students and institutions alike, there are still reasons to be apprehensive about deploying it. The most daunting concern is that the self-paced nature of online CBE programs may lead to courses lacking the necessary regular, substantive interaction with faculty required by the government for online learning designation (Chen, 2017). According to Kelchen (2015), the government still does not allow many CBE programs to receive federal financial aid. A federal audit of Western Governor's University (WGU), the most well-known CBE institution, stated that many of the CBE courses at WGU did not meet the requirements for distance education in terms of student-faculty interaction and should therefore be categorized as correspondence courses (Fain, 2017). The result of this is, as correspondence courses, the college would not be eligible to receive federal financial aid. The report called for WGU to return $713 million in financial aid it had previously received. There has been meaningful progress, as the Department of Education ruled in January of 2019 that WGU is eligible to participate in federal financial aid programs after reviewing a multitude of factors, including the interaction between students and faculty in courses. WGU is confident that this will lead to the rewriting of the outdated distance education law from the early 1990s, and this change could lead to CBE being easier and cheaper to implement moving forward.

Another concern of CBE is that it truly is a departure from the traditional business processes at most schools. Institutions seeking to implement CBE are likely to fight decades or more of inertia due to the largely unchanged traditional models of education built on the credit hour. In addition, online CBE requires faculty to have a more facilitative role than traditional models, and faculty roles are often disaggregated so that support staff can provide individualized assistance to students at any time (Chen, 2017; Fain, 2017). Faculty may be resistant to this change and may be fearful that online CBE programs make their role less important.

Last, some students have struggled with the self-paced component of CBE. This has the potential to lead to students taking longer to complete a CBE program, which can potentially become more costly than a traditional program as a result (Kelchen, 2015). CBE is not for every student, and being a self-directed learner is important for success in an online CBE program. Some institutions have addressed this by creating "CBE Readiness" exams for students to take before entering a CBE program.

3 | REFLECTION

Online CBE has the potential to move higher education away from the seat time model and instead focus on more valid measurements of student learning. In addition, the recent developments with the Department of Education and WGU may very well lead to meaningful reform of outdated distance education policies. Fixing these policies may lead to the viability of other alternative distance education models becoming eligible for financial aid.

Having been a part of bringing online CBE to a university over the past few years, I have seen firsthand that it is no easy feat. Faculty are mostly resistant to this concept and most cannot conceptualize how they could possibly do it. The fear of adjuncts

"taking over" is a major concern for faculty. After attending a few of the major CBE conferences over the last few years, my biggest take away was that the CBE space is still "messy." Kelchen (2015) mentions that there does not appear to be a standard definition of what CBE actually is or looks like, even from schools currently deploying CBE programs. I have found this to be true and a one-size-fits-all model to implement a program simply does not exist. In short, there are too many contextual factors that differ by institution for anyone to say, "here's how you implement an online CBE program." CBE may be able to provide new enrollment to schools, but there are fixed and variable costs that will need to be incurred to implement and sustain CBE. Training faculty and staff, hiring for specific responsibilities that were disaggregated from the faculty role, course development, and providing just-in-time learner support are all examples of costs that quickly add up when implementing a CBE model.

Gaining accreditation is also of major concern. Even some accreditors do not appear to have all the answers. There does not appear to be much consensus into what the requirements of CBE are or what should or should not be included and why.

The online CBE space has already begun to lower the cost of education for students and provide needed alternatives to traditional models of education. Many students have already benefitted from these programs because they provide students the flexibility they desire at a lower cost (at least opportunity cost) than traditional universities. As more schools adopt online CBE models, research into the effectiveness of these models, the costs of attendance for the students compared with traditional models, and the costs of administering the program to the institution compared with traditional programs will be important determinants of how disruptive online CBE truly is to the landscape of higher education.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No conflicts declared.

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