

INSIDE HIGHER ED

Taking the Direct Path

Competency-based education is gaining steam, but questions remain about which forms the U.S. Department of Education will back.

By [Paul Fain](#)

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Scores of colleges are gearing up to offer new competency-based degrees. But some college leaders are confused about whether the U.S. Department of Education remains supportive of a new form of competency-based education that does not rely on the credit hour standard.

This approach is called [direct assessment](#) -- as in directly measuring student knowledge and learning, rather than linking it to seat time and grades. Institutions that seek to try direct assessment first must get a green light from the department and their accreditor in order to qualify for federal financial aid.

Last March the [feds issued](#) a Dear Colleague [letter](#) with a positive take on direct assessment that also offered guidelines for interested colleges. Shortly thereafter, College for America, a subsidiary of Southern New Hampshire University, got the department to sign off on associate degrees that are completely untethered from the credit hour. Capella University was next with direct assessment programs that earned federal approval last August.

Two public universities have also made their case to the department. Last year Northern Arizona University submitted an application for direct-assessment degrees. And the University of Wisconsin System followed last month.

However, Northern Arizona hit a snag with its application.

The university last year **created** self-paced, online degree tracks that are competency-based. Its regional accreditor, the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, granted approval to the university's new "Personalized Learning" bachelor's degrees, which are in computer information technology, liberal arts and small business administration.

Fred Hurst, senior vice president of the university's extended campuses, has played a leadership role in developing the competency-based degrees. When Northern Arizona first described the programs to department officials, he said they thought the programs should be classified as direct assessment degrees.

The university subsequently submitted an application. But department officials in January told Northern Arizona that the program was not of the direct assessment variety, according to the definition under **federal regulations** (see box).

No big deal, said Hurst. The university is moving ahead with its competency-based programs, which will look more like those offered by Western Governors University and others that still "map" their assessments to course equivalencies.

“We’re doing all the same things, but we’re tying them more closely to the credit hour,” he said. “We don’t see any downsides.”

Federal definition:

A *direct assessment program* is an instructional program that, in lieu of credit hours or clock hours as a measure of student learning, utilizes direct assessment of student learning, or recognizes the direct assessment of student learning by others. The assessment must be consistent with the accreditation of the institution or program utilizing the results of the assessment.

Source: U.S. Government Printing Office

Students in the degree tracks can receive federal aid. And Hurst said the university is well on its way to hit a first-year enrollment target of 500 students.

Even so, the feds’ take on Northern Arizona’s application has created confusion and some concern among supporters of competency-based education.

“If the department wanted to dump cold water on an idea that had a lot of excitement, this was a good way to do it,” said Mike Offerman, a former president of Capella and an expert on competency-based programs.

Lack of Clarity

The Lumina Foundation is helping a **group of institutions** attempt to design competency-based programs. And the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation is funding a separate, but **similar effort**. All together, Offerman said he is aware of more than 80 institutions that are mulling new competency-based degrees.

Not everyone agreed with Offerman that Northern Arizona’s experience would have a chilling effect on direct assessment. But several sources echoed his call for more clarity from the department as those 80 colleges spend time and money developing the new, still-controversial programs.

David Bergeron, a former department official who is vice president for postsecondary education at the Center for American Progress, said he was “troubled” by news that Northern Arizona would not go down the direct assessment path. While he is a fan of the Western Governors approach, Bergeron said he would like to see more colleges move fully beyond the credit hour.

Continuing to insist that “we learn in three- to four-credit increments seems to be a step in the wrong direction,” he said, adding that “we’re throwing away some of the promise” of competency-based education by not encouraging direct assessment.

David Schejbal, dean of continuing education, outreach and e-learning at the University of Wisconsin-Extension, said he was surprised by the department’s response to Northern Arizona. “It simply confused us more.”

But that didn’t stop the university from moving forward with an application to qualify its competency-based degrees -- offered under the so-called the UW Flexible Option -- for federal aid as direct assessment programs.

“This is really new for everybody,” said Schejbal. “Our approach has been to engage with the department.”

High Praise

Education Department officials didn’t have much to say about their take on direct assessment. The department did not comment on whether it had changed its stance, offering only a brief written statement on the Northern Arizona decision.

“We did not turn down the application. The direct assessment authority is for use by programs that are not clock or credit hour based,” said a department spokeswoman. “Northern Arizona’s program as described in their application was based on credit hours -- so they did not need to use the direct assessment authority to award federal financial aid.”

Hurst agreed with that assessment (no pun intended). “They had more information” after seeing the application, he said.

Congress in 2005 passed a law that opened the door for colleges to participate in federal financial aid programs by directly assessing student learning without taking into account course hours or time spent in a classroom.

That authority was created with Western Governors in mind. But the **university opted** not to use it. College for America was the first to design its assessments without a grounding in course equivalents.

It’s understandable that colleges might fret over whether the Obama administration and the Education Department will stand behind an approach to higher education that many see as **fundamentally different**. Direct assessment programs feature no traditional courses, teaching professors, grades, deadlines or credit hour requirements.

However, several experts said they remain optimistic about the department’s support. One reason is that Arne Duncan himself has been unequivocal in his backing of direct assessment.

“This is a key step forward in expanding access to affordable higher education,” Duncan, the U.S. secretary of education, said last year in a **written**

statement. “We know many students and adult learners across the country need the flexibility to fit their education into their lives or work through a class on their own pace, and these competency-based programs offer those features -- and they are often accessible to students anytime, anywhere.” Institutions can also pursue experiments with competency-based education through waivers for certain financial-aid rules the department plans to grant as part of its “experimental sites” program. Many colleges have begun **submitting ideas** and applications.

The department has had **plenty of turnover** during the last year. For example, Ted Mitchell has yet to receive Congressional approval as the new under secretary of higher education. (He would replace Martha Kanter in that role, which **Jamienne Studley**, the deputy under secretary, is handling in the interim.)

As a result, some observers said it makes sense for the department to stay mum about direct assessment for now, at least until more top officials fill their posts.

Turf Battles

In the meantime, tension will persist about various models of competency-based education. The field is expanding rapidly, and some of its front-runners may seek for their approach to be the one favored by politicians, regulators and pundits.

There are also legitimate concerns about the transferability of credits earned in competency-based programs. So even direct assessment degrees will be translated into credits or course equivalencies on the back end, at least for now.

Pamela Tate, president and CEO of the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL), has said that many questions have yet to be resolved about direct assessment. But she urged colleges not to wait until all of those questions are answered.

“Do not to hesitate to find ways to recognize learning and move more adults toward degree completion through a rigorous and high quality competency-based process,” Tate [has written](#).

For his part, Bergeron said no one model should dominate in competency-based education. He hopes colleges will “explore a full range of possibilities,” including degree programs that are not constrained by credit hours.

Wisconsin has already begun enrolling students in its [direct-assessment programs](#), which [include](#) bachelor degrees, certificates and general-education associate degrees. Schejbal said 23 students signed up in January. He anticipates enrolling 40 new students each month.

Students in the program cannot receive federal aid until the depart approves its application. So the university is covering that shortfall with its own grants. “We chose to award aid directly,” Schejbal said.

The university will convert competencies to credit equivalencies on students’ transcripts. As a result, Schejbal acknowledges that there is a “fuzzy margin” between what Wisconsin is doing and more conventional competency-based programs. And those unclear differences probably make it hard for regulators.

“I would be surprised if the department doesn’t struggle with that,” he said.

Read more by [Paul Fain](#)

<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2014/02/21/direct-assessment-and-feds-take-competency-based-education>