Competency-based Learning: Accelerating Degree Completion and Improving Affordability in Higher Education

Emerging model focuses on real learning, not seat time, as a metric of student success.
WHAT IS COMPETENCY-BASED LEARNING?

Competency-based Learning is an emerging model that is building a foundation for achievement by allowing institutions to serve more students in less time, at lower cost, with a focus on real learning that leads to greater employability. With an emphasis on students progressing as they demonstrate mastery of competencies, regardless of the amount of seat time, students are able to accelerate their learning experience. Students are rewarded for prior knowledge that they demonstrate during pre-tests, and once a student displays competence, based on their assessment by professors, they are free to move on to other areas of the course or, in some cases, test out of the course entirely. Students are able to spend more time focusing on areas of the course that require more of their attention and spend less time on topics they have mastered. With a greater focus on applicable learning outcomes, students can accelerate their learning path if they are already competent in a certain subject. This allows for a faster track to graduation, reduced cost to complete a degree, and provides more practical and relevant skills for the workforce.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 38 percent of those enrolled in higher education are over the age of 25 and one-fourth are over the age of 30. The share of all students who are over age 25 is projected to increase another 23 percent by 2019. There have been several developments created to address this paradigm shift, including accelerated degree programs.*

BENEFITS TO INSTITUTIONS AND FACULTY

Competency-based Learning programs give colleges and universities the opportunity to target a new set of non-traditional students, such as adult learners that need flexibility in their course offerings and may not have the freedom or time to attend on-campus higher education courses. From a faculty perspective, professors can work with their students as a coach or mentor; professors can create personalized learning paths based on student assessments. This results in highly engaged educational scenarios where student coursework is personalized to meet their specific needs.

PARTNERING WITH PEARSON: A CONSULTATIVE & COLLABORATIVE APPROACH

Pearson partners with institutions to develop competency-based online degree programs that target not just the student’s ability to know something well, but the ability to apply that knowledge in proper context. Our Custom Curriculum team of talented, highly credentialed instructional design and curriculum development experts work with institutions to develop quality, instructionally sound curriculum, content and educational solutions that improve learning outcomes. Pearson partners with institutions to design a modular curriculum that has a clearly defined hierarchy of learning outcomes and their associations with all related content. The outcomes are central to the student experience, whether engaging in presentation, practice, collaboration or assessment activities. Student success is measured with ongoing evaluation to ensure course- and program-level efficacy and provides opportunities for data-driven decisions around curriculum revision and enhancement.

*Source: Education Week article: http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/rick_hess_straight_up/2011/10/the_changing_face_of_higher_education.html
Northern Arizona University partnered with Pearson to develop more than 90 completely online competency-based courses for three fully online Baccalaureate degrees, including Computer Information Technology, Business Administration (with a specialization in small business), and Liberal Studies. The courses are offered through the Pearson LearningStudio cloud-based Learning Management System. Courses utilize learning outcomes to allow students to demonstrate competencies; a wide range of high-quality content that includes readiness testing and remediation support; and advanced data analytics applications to monitor and analyze trends in student performance, and track their achievement of learning objectives.

Competency-based Learning at NAU allows students to jump-start certain bachelor’s degree programs by pretesting to determine what they already know, allowing them to receive credits for prior learning and experience. The program then provides a variety of individualized academic resources to ensure steady progress, including extensive mentoring.

Students work online at their own pace, receiving assistance based on frequent assessments of their needs and learning styles. Faculty members actively participate by advising and mentoring, using information gained from student tests and other inputs to offer customized strategies for success.

The university launched its competency-based degree programs in May 2013, and expects to enroll several thousand students over the next few years. In the future, NAU will also measure success by conducting efficacy research around its Competency-based Learning degree programs to analyze student learning outcomes.
In September 2013, The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board and College for All Texans Foundation announced a partnership with Pearson to work with two state institutions, Texas A&M University-Commerce and South Texas College, to create a Competency-based Learning Bachelor of Applied Sciences (BAS) degree in Organizational Leadership. The program is called the Texas Affordable Baccalaureate Project (TAB) and is supported by an EDUCAUSE Next Generation Learning Challenges (NGLC) grant, funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. EDUCAUSE partners in NGLC are the League for Innovation in the Community College, the Council of Chief State School Officers, and iNACOL. The program aligns with Governor Rick Perry’s vision to create more affordable, competency-based baccalaureate programs for students in Texas.

Faculty from both institutions are leading the curriculum design effort with Pearson assisting in the development of 90 credit hours of online competency-based courses, providing custom curriculum and instructional design that aligns with the competencies established by the faculty. The program will launch in Spring 2014 and is expected to serve 250 students in its first year and enroll over 6,000 students by 2019.

The BAS in Organizational Leadership curriculum centers on the 21st century skills outlined by the Association of American Colleges and Universities’ Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) initiative. These skills include: Knowledge of Human Cultures and the Physical and Natural World, Intellectual and Practical Skills, Personal and Social Responsibility, and Integrative and Applied Learning.

“We are pleased that these institutions have not only embraced innovation but are collaborating in ways that will greatly benefit students by giving them a new path to completion. Pearson’s commitment to assist faculty from both institutions throughout this process is critical for the program’s ultimate success.”

— Dr. Raymund Paredes
Texas Commissioner of Higher Education

To learn more about how your institution can partner with Pearson to develop Competency-based Learning programs that improve achievement and affordability, visit www.pearsoncustomcurriculum.com