Competency-Based Assessments: What’s Happening in Your State and at Your Institution?

National Institute on the Assessment of Adult Learning
June, 2013
Connecticut, New Jersey, and New York each founded a college in the 1970s to provide adult students with alternative paths to a degree – basically competency-based education. These institutions were the forerunners of today’s competency-based education movement.

- Charter Oak State College
- Thomas Edison State College
- SUNY Empire State College
- Excelsior College
COMPETENCY MOVEMENT: WHY NOW?

Building on the past 40+ years

- Working adult students
- PLA
- Competency-based programs
- Outcomes/accountability
- Costs
COMPETENCY MOVEMENT: WHY NOW?

Accelerating Forces

- Economy—local & global
- Educated workforce
- Technology—mass information
COMPETENCY MOVEMENT NOW

Agenda for Higher Education

- Increase access for adult learners
- Lower costs to students—time & $$
- ✓ Shift focus to learning & outcomes
- Contribute to employability
- Promote collaboration across systems
- Engage in bold innovations

DePaul University, School for New Learning
HLC is overseeing a pilot program with four participating institutions: Capella University, Northern Arizona University, the University of Wisconsin Colleges, a system of two-year campuses; and the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee.
On the Federal Level…

- President Obama

- March 19, 2013: The Department of Education endorsed competency-based education with the release of a letter that encourages interested colleges to seek federal approval for degree programs that do not rely on the credit hour to measure student learning.
What Employers Are Saying

- Clearly define what graduates are expected to know, do
- Communicate these expectations to students, employers
Gallup/Lumina Poll: Feb. 5, 2013

“[Respondents] overwhelmingly want to see a new system of credentials and credits that is defined by learning and competencies rather than time.”
The Carnegie Unit
1906 - ?

“...the Carnegie Foundation now believes it is time to consider how a revised unit, based on competency rather than time, could improve teaching and learning in high schools, colleges, and universities.”

The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, December, 2012
Definition of Competencies

- Beyond “learning outcomes”
- Not just skills and knowledge, but also ability to apply learning in different situation
- Specific in terms of levels of performance
- Objectively measurable
Competing Definitions of Degree Completion

Time spent is fixed; amount learned is variable.

or

Time spent is variable; amount of learned is fixed.
A Definition

“We don’t have agreement on what we mean by the term competency.”

Carol Geary Schneider, president of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, April, 2013
Assessment is **competence-based** when it measures what a student is able to do, based on specific knowledge, within a certain context.
Assessment is **competence-based** when it measures what a student is able to do, based on specific knowledge, within a certain context.

Assessment is **course-based** when it measures what a student knows or is able to do, in alignment with an existing course.
Lessons Learned

- Assessment of learning, whether with a course-based framework or a competency-based framework, is complex.
Competency-Based Frameworks

Essential conditions for assessment criteria, course-based or competency-based

Assessment criteria must be:

- Framed within a curricular or other context
- Applied by an assessor with content expertise
- Specific, flexible, and transparent for all – assessor and learner
- Determined by those who are qualified to set the standards
- Appropriate to the context and of a level of complexity that is “college level”
Western Governors University

- List of competencies defined for all degree, in consultation with employers and industry experts
- No traditional courses/instruction
- Faculty serve as mentors, identify educational resources for students to learn and acquire competencies
- Students assessed for each competency in their progress towards a degree
Westminster College

- 2 year bachelor’s degree program in business for students with an associate degree
- Students complete 20 projects in five separate project sequences – opportunities to demonstrate required competencies.
- Institution provides resources for students to access the learning they need to complete the projects – no courses.
- Students can draw on what they have learned in their work lives to complete the projects (PLA).
College for America: Southern New Hampshire University

Associates Degree in General Studies/Business emphasis

- Online self-paced, self-directed model
- Personal coach
- 120 competencies
- Nine competency clusters
- Primary form of assessment is completion of a Task
DePaul University School for New Learning

- Students progress towards degrees based on competencies, not credit hours
- Students learn through courses from SNL, courses from other institutions, and independent study
- Students can use prior learning to demonstrate competencies
Signature Features for Competence Assessment

- Assessment feedback is an integral part of learning, and similarly, competence assessment is a feedback loop within a system.
- A competence framework need not be fixed nor removed from context.
- It can be done inside, beside, outside.

Adapted from DePaul University, School for New Learning
What’s Happening?

- In your state?
- At your institution?

A conversation…
What Is Your State Doing?

Tennessee
- Common PLA articulation across the 2 higher education systems
- Outcomes-based funding

Texas
- Many administrative groups, not always coordinated
- Tuning with engineering degrees/vertical alignment

Washington
- Pilot with community colleges: competency-based education and assessment
What Is Your Institution Doing?

Some examples:

- Applied baccalaureate in Michigan in maritime technology is competency-based
- University of Memphis – competency-based degree helps accelerate completion
- Rutgers Continuing Education – transfer AAS degrees in as a block
- Polk State College – align competencies with national industry standards and certification
What Is Your Institution Doing?

- Granite State College & University of Maryland University College – individualized pathways using competencies
- South Seattle Community College – apprenticeships articulated to credit; stackable credentials; applied baccalaureate degrees
- Northeastern Illinois University – 100% competency degrees
Barriers to Competency-Based Education and Assessment

- Lack of competency statements from professional groups
- Lack of clear assessment rubrics
- Absence of disciplinary foundations integrating theory, research, and practice
- No clear business model
- Faculty, administration, and accreditors
- Perception that competency-based lack rigor
- No common definition of competencies and quality
- Limited financial and human resources
To Overcome Barriers:

- Develop clear rubrics and business models
- Create outside advisory councils that include employers and professional groups
- Make clear that applied learning = competencies
- Align competencies with national industry standards