Obstacles for Competency-Based Education Programs

National Institute on the Assessment of Adult Learning
June 9th, 2016
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What is the Purpose of Higher Education?
Survey Says...

What incoming freshmen cited as a very important

• Getting a job or a better job – 85.2%

• Learning - 79.6%
Students care about degrees
Students care about the economic signaling potential of those degrees
Students care about the return on investment from those degrees.
Is the degree a good representation of what students know?
Are courses and grades a good representation of what students can do?
Could we come up with a better solution?
Competency-Based Education (CBE)
Competency-based Education is an approach that uses a student’s mastery of knowledge and capabilities as a measure of progress, rather than the traditional measure of time spent in a classroom as a yardstick for achievement.
Modern CBE focuses on a self-paced, modular curriculum aligned to workforce needs
Where did this idea come from?

• 1960s – Teacher education and training
• 1970s – Higher education opportunities to working adults (Learning outcomes/PLA)
• 1997 – Western Governors University
• 2005 – Direct Assessment
What are the obstacles that could prevent its growth/success?
Defining CBE

• According to a Lumina estimate in 2015, 350 schools were building or planning to build CBE programs

• According to a more recent survey by the American Association of Community Colleges, 68% of CC are planning to build a CBE program

• No agreed upon common framework, nor definitions
Defining CBE
For students

• Capella Flexpath
• UW Flexible Option
• Northern Arizona Personalized Learning
• City University of Seattle Performance-based Learning
Defining CBE
For students (cont.)

• Faster
• Cheaper
• More Flexible

vs.

• Transparent
• Workforce-Aligned
Defining CBE
For students (cont.)

• An estimated 35% of all college students transfer credit from one institution to another

• How does transfer of competencies work without a common framework?

• Tethers us to the Carnegie Credit Hour
Defining CBE
For employers

• Employers value degrees for their signaling potential
• Average employer spends six seconds on a resume
• Will they really validate +350 different kinds of competency maps?
Defining CBE
For Ed Tech

• New models require new technologies to facilitate them
• Vendors lack a clear understanding of what functionality schools need
• Once technologies are entrenched, schools will design to the tech
Defining CBE
For Regulators

- Without an agreed upon standard, the DOE and Regional Accreditors cling to the Carnegie Credit Hour
- We can’t advise regulators as to what we want
- Accreditors are incentivized to discourage innovation in order to prevent abuses
Regulators and Financial Aid
We work in a system that is entirely fueled by federal money. Financial Aid Eligibility is a prerequisite for success.
The Department of Education is trying to support thoughtful innovation
Experimental Sites Initiative

- Prior Learning Assessment
- Competency-Based Education
- Limited Direct Assessment
Danger of Exploitation

• Between loans, grants, and tax benefits, the federal government spends ~ $166B per year.

• Bad actors could look to profit off expanded access, while misrepresenting the quality of services.
Danger of Orphan Programs

• Hundreds of schools are building programs with no common framework

• If regulators decide for us, we may end up the programs that don’t comply, and don’t have the resources to transform
What should we (the taxpayers) be paying for?
PLA vs CBE

• PLA – measure of college-level learning that a student has acquired, but for which they have not received a formal credential

• CBE – measurement of student learning against a set of standards, without regard for time or location.
These concepts are embedded within one another, and not easily separated

So how do we resolve this theoretical dissonance?
Separate out PLA from CBE and measure it separately

- Eliminates some of the utility of the self-paced format

- Burdens students with the cost of assessing prior learning
Artificially delay students as they progress through competency-modules

• Creates the illusion that they have learned everything required during the appointed payment period

• Bars students from advancing at their own pace
What’s more important, the Credential or the Learning?
False Dichotomy between Vocational Training and Education
Culturally, in the United States, we see an artificial bifurcation of a common process – learning – into high (liberal education) and low (vocational training) status categories.

But why?
Overturn of the apprenticeship model

- State legislatures did away with what they believed to be "undemocratic" professional licensing laws in the 1830s and 40s.
- This led to proprietary law and medical schools springing up across the American landscape.
- This is the beginning of the degree as a proxy for skills.
The split widens

• National Vocational Education Act in 1917
  – Vocational programs were placed under the control of local boards of education, rather than companies or trade organizations
  – Students, programs, and funding were segregated

• Unions side with Educators
  – Worried employer-based education would weaken bargaining power
Rise of Regional Accreditation

• Regional Accreditors were created to establish common college entrance standards and accredit secondary schools
• Secondary schools invested in transforming their curriculum to meet those standards
• Vocational education, meanwhile, fell further by the wayside
Educational Tracking

- Studies in the 1960s and 70s showed that students in vocational programs were more likely to be from lower-income families with lower levels of education.
- Vocational programs had become a silo for people who weren’t succeeding in the traditional academic environment.
Education vs Training

• Political choices have colored our cultural understanding of these concepts
• Learning is learning, no matter where it’s found
• Education that prepares students for an occupation is not fundamentally worse than a liberal education
• There’s no reason these concepts need to be separated
CBE is an important and desperately needed innovation in higher education

However, we need

- Common **definitions** of CBE
- Coherent **government policy** that encourages innovations while preventing bad actors
- To demonstrate how occupational training and liberal education can **co-exist effectively**
Questions?

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Notes