

Chapter 5

The Challenge of CBE Programs: Administrative and Technological Considerations of Non- Semester-Based Programs

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ABSTRACT

Using the student lifecycle as a framework, the authors explore the administrative and technological considerations pertaining to competency-based education (CBE). The goal of this chapter is to familiarize readers with the administrative issues surrounding the development of CBE programs. While the chapter is not all-inclusive, it should serve as a starting point for higher education leaders interested in CBE, especially those lacking the resources to develop a program outside existing governance, policies, and systems. This chapter may serve as a guide for institutional leaders working through the administrative challenges related to CBE programs. The authors address aspects of recruitment, marketing, pre-admission support, admissions, advising, orientation, registration, billing, programs of study, access to institutional resources, transcripts, and key performance indicators. The chapter concludes with future research directions as well as solutions and recommendations.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education has faced significant challenges in recent years. Shifting demographics, reductions in funding and revenue sources, and increasing competition has caused higher education administrators to explore different methods of program delivery to attract new learners. In recent years, competency-based education (CBE) has dominated the conversations in many higher education circles. With the promise of flexibility for contemporary learners, business models that can reduce the cost and time to degree, and ‘on demand’ delivery that appeals to student-consumers, CBE has the potential to have a dramatic

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-0932-5.ch005

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impact on the postsecondary landscape. CBE systems and processes, however, bring administrative and technological challenges to the institutions trying to implement them. The goal of this chapter is to identify these challenges and highlight examples of the ways institutions have leveraged existing resources and developed new policies and procedures to support CBE programs, assuming that CBE programs will meet the needs and expectations that exist for post-traditional learners throughout the student lifecycle.

Competency-based education is not a new concept; rather, its origins trace back to the Middle Ages, to a time when craft guilds were in their infancy (Spady, 1994). Over the centuries, apprenticeship training institutionalized the design and delivery of instruction that required the demonstration of knowledge, skills and attitudes (Spady, 1994). The concept of knowledge, skills, and attitudes (KSAs) would become the basis for the educational outcomes movement in the United States during the mid-20th century (Malan, 2000). Leaders in this movement include Tyler (1949) and Bloom (1956) whose development of a taxonomy that specifically identified the three domains of learning: cognitive (knowledge), affective (attitude), and psychomotor (skills) is the framework for many CBE programs.

IMPLICATIONS FOR INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Only in recent years have postsecondary institutions considered offering CBE degree programs. Northern Arizona University, Southern New Hampshire University, Western Governor's University, and the University of Wisconsin are but a few notable institutions that have launched CBE degree programs. Many of these early-adopting postsecondary institutions have done so by developing administrative, curricular, and technical processes outside their institutions' traditional processes to accommodate courses and programs delivered outside of standard semester timelines. Such non-semester based programs can have functionality that is necessary for CBE programs, including: multiple start and end dates; a self-paced learning format to allow for accelerated or extended completion times; and courses that overlap traditional terms. Developing CBE programs within 'traditional' confines is possible only if institutional leaders are prepared to examine and revise the policies and procedures that can act as barriers for CBE program development and student enrollment. The complexities of implementing CBE programs, administrative systems, technology, and policies will continue to challenge those institutional leaders who do not have the ability to develop academic programs outside of existing institutional structures, policies, and governance.

Because most post-secondary CBE programs are online (Kelchen, 2105), CBE programs face many of the same issues as traditional online learning programs but with additional requirements or considerations for the non-traditional adult learner population, in particular. For example, the question of whether an online CBE student should pay a student fee to support physical resources on campus such as a student union or recreation center is the same issue face by institutions when implementing traditional online learning programs. CBE programs, however, must also grapple with the additional challenge of how an online learning fee would be assessed for non-term based instruction. Institutions who decide to develop CBE programs should conduct a formal review of existing online learning policies and practices to identify additional functionality required for effective CBE program delivery and to create a user experience that is attractive to adult and contemporary online students.

Many enterprise systems, institutional policies, and student business activities depend on dates and deadlines related to term-based instruction. Understanding the design and system rules that exist within institutional enterprise systems, such as a student information system (SIS) and technology, is critical to

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