

Chapter 12

Creating Connections: Competency-Based Degree Programs and Undergraduate Capstone Courses for Adult Learners

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ABSTRACT

Undergraduate adult learners need flexible, cost-efficient ways to increase knowledge, enhance skills, or complete a college degree. The rising cost of college tuition coupled with the demands of work/life balance challenge many individuals seeking a higher education degree. As such, higher education administrators and faculty members need to identify new approaches to learning in higher education that address these barriers and open the access to earning a college degree. Capstone courses connect prior learning in coursework with real-world experiences. This chapter addresses competency-based degree plans and application-based capstone courses for undergraduate university students. Examples of competency-based degree plans and capstone courses will be discussed. Inclusion in the discussion will be prior learning assessment courses. Testimonials from learners are provided along with a model for designing an effective capstone course for undergraduate adult learners.

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INTRODUCTION

Competency-based education allows adult learners with the opportunity to save time and money in earning a college degree. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2018), “By enabling students to master skills at their own pace, competency-based learning systems help to save both time and money. Depending on the strategy pursued, competency-based systems also create multiple pathways to graduation, make better use of technology, support new staffing patterns that utilize teacher skills and interests differently, take advantage of learning opportunities outside of school hours and walls, and help identify opportunities to target interventions to meet the specific learning needs of students. Each of these presents an opportunity to achieve greater efficiency and increase productivity,” (p.1).

While there is a great number of institutions of higher learning that offer competency-based education programs, this chapter will provide a case study approach to the offerings at Open College at Purdue University Global.

ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

Open College at Purdue University Global offers free online services and personalized mentoring to help learners identify and organize prior work and life experience and skills that could count toward a degree or move them closer to a new career. Open College at Purdue University Global is an excellent option for adult learners looking to enhance existing skills and/or complete a degree. Open College at Purdue University Global addresses a growing trend in competency-based education and the need to create affordable, flexible learning options for adult learners. Open College at Purdue University Global has reduced the economic barriers allowing individuals to pursue learning to enhance their academic and professional interests. The implications for institutions of higher education lie in establishing ways to improve access and reduce cost for individuals pursuing higher education with a design to meet academic and professional needs (Open College, Purdue University Global, 2018).

Featuring a monthly subscription-based tuition, Open College at Purdue University Global extends the current open courses offered by Purdue University Global to students who are interested in seeking a degree, as well as responds to the increasing accessibility of other open learning resources. The college is geared toward adult learners interested in a highly flexible degree and who have prior learning experience or college-level credits. Students in the college may complete a Bachelor of Science in Professional Studies (BSPr) degree.

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