

# Chapter 15

## Experimentation With Competency-Based Education at the University of Phoenix

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### ABSTRACT

*The author of this chapter, Ward Wesolowski, served as the Dean of Operations in the Center of Competency-Based Education (CBE) at the University of Phoenix. In this role, a substantial amount of experimentation was conducted to uncover insights relating to technology, faculty roles, curriculum, policy, and most importantly, the student experience in CBE. In an endeavor as complicated as creating CBE offerings at a large institution of higher education, there was only one thing that was certain: failure. At University of Phoenix, it was important to fail fast, learn, improve, and try again. This iterative approach allowed Ward and his team to quickly see what worked and what did not, so improvement efforts could be focused on the elements requiring the most attention. Valuable insights and recommendations are contained in this chapter for anyone aspiring to produce CBE offerings for students in higher education.*

In 1976, Dr. John Sperling “decided what higher education needed was a new way for working adults to go to school” (Hanford, n.d., para. 22). Traditional schools held classes during weekdays, and regular working hours did not suit the typical life constraints of working adults. Sperling created a university that met the educational needs of adults who yearn for greater opportunity later in life. In this new model, classes were designed to be taken one at a time, a sharp contrast to the traditional multi-class semester system. Furthermore, courses were not 15 weeks long. Instead, baccalaureate courses spanned only 5 weeks. Students were encouraged to leverage the real-world experience they had accumulated to provide a context for their new learning that would enrich their learning experience, as well as the learning experience of their classmates. The faculty model was designed differently too, as many faculty members held full-time jobs in the fields they taught. Sperling saw this as another means of infusing relevant professional experience into the coursework. In 1989, University of Phoenix launched its first online courses as an additional means to meet the needs of working adult students. As one of the first

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universities to cater to the educational needs of working adults, the University of Phoenix experienced rapid expansive growth. In 2010, the university hit its peak student enrollment at over 470,000 students.

## **Changes in Modern Higher Education and the Use of CBE**

As the University of Phoenix was growing in the 1990's and early 2000's, a significant shift in the demographics of higher education students was taking place. As McDonnell describes, "The characteristics of the traditional college student today have shifted. Non-traditional college students are now the new majority" (2017, para. 1). In fact, "70 percent of Americans who have pursued a bachelor's degree qualify as non-traditional students" (McDonnell, 2017, para. 4). Non-traditional students are typically defined as adult learners, meaning they are at least 25 years of age and employed in a full-time occupation. As such, adult learners in higher education require flexibility and support above and beyond the levels that traditional universities provide. In response, the University of Phoenix was continually searching for fresh new ideas and innovations such as competency-based education (CBE).

It is important to note that CBE is not an entirely new concept. According to Morcke, Dornan, and Eika, "The basic idea of emphasizing educational objectives had been given its definitive form by Tyler as early as 1949" (2013, p. 847). A handful of institutions have offered CBE programs for decades at modest scale, yet scaling this instructional approach has been nearly impossible because there was not technology robust enough to support it. However, the changing higher education student demographic, the vast adoption and acceptance of online learning along with innovations of the disaggregated faculty model, and an increased ability to capture critical data via innovative learning management systems are all notable factors that are contributing to a CBE renaissance.

This convergence of factors has led to significant opportunities for institutions of higher education to meet student academic needs on a different level and University of Phoenix is uniquely positioned for CBE offerings given its history serving non-traditional students. "The rise of competency-based education has redefined what college looks like for a growing number of students (Baker, 2015, p. ii). The CBE model is compelling for University of Phoenix students for two primary reasons. First, students can leverage practical experience from work to accelerate necessary competency development and demonstration. Second, University of Phoenix students are time constrained. Allowing students to accelerate progress by leveraging previous experience to demonstrate competency will reduce the time it takes to earn a credential. There is also a more direct connection between a well-designed CBE program and desired career skills – another important benefit from the perspective of a typical University of Phoenix student. According to Corcoran and McNeal (2016, para. 1), "Competency-Based learning has received widespread recognition as a way to better align higher education to careers. Rather than measuring 'seat time' for traditional credit hours, colleges and universities are tracking student progress on demonstrated capabilities." As an innovative, non-traditional institution of higher education designed to meet the need of working adults, Competency-Based Education (CBE) was a natural fit.

## **The Inception of CBE at University of Phoenix**

Interest in CBE programs at University of Phoenix began in 2014. Early on, there was a desire to develop two Master's level programs: one in business and the other in education. Initially, curriculum development efforts were spearheaded by the programs' respective colleges while project management, policy development, technology requirements, and student experience design responsibilities were managed in

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