

Chapter 16

Opportunities for Innovation With Competencies as Currency

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ABSTRACT

Learners' needs are changing rapidly, driven by innovations in technology and the world of work. Increasingly, learners need flexible education options and the ability to verify their own competencies as valuable currency for careers. Multiple trends are putting pressure on postsecondary education to be more flexible and competency based. Credit hours as a basis for defining credentials will drive postsecondary practices for some time, but there are opportunities for innovation with competencies as a parallel and complementary currency. Credit hours define degree attainment, financial aid, and other critical functions. Competencies articulate learning that has value both within and outside educational institutions. This chapter analyzes how credits and competencies provide value for stakeholders in learning ecosystems, including education providers, employers, and learners. Effective changes in postsecondary practices can be achieved through focusing on competency-based learning and credentialing practices that incorporate the value of competencies into credit hour-based processes.

INTRODUCTION

Learners' needs are changing rapidly, driven by innovations in technology and the world of work. Increasingly learners need flexible education options and the ability to verify their own competencies as valuable currency for career progression. Multiple trends are putting pressure on postsecondary education to be more flexible and competency-based. Credit hours as a basis for defining credentials will drive postsecondary practices for some time, but there is ample opportunity for innovation with competencies as a parallel and complementary currency. Credit hours define degree attainment, financial aid, and other critical educational functions. Competencies articulate learning that has value both within and

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outside educational institutions. This chapter analyzes how credits *and* competencies provide value for stakeholders in learning ecosystems, including educational leaders and administrators, faculty, assessors, government agencies, learners, and employers (Everhart and Seymour, 2017). Effective changes in postsecondary practices can be achieved through a focus on competency-based learning and credentialing practices that incorporate the value of competencies into credit hour-based processes.

For over a century, the credit hour has been a unit of measure in U.S. postsecondary education, a recognized currency for educational achievement and completion of credentials. Processes built around credit hours are based on Industrial Age, highly structured, time-based educational models, presenting challenges in adapting these processes in a knowledge economy that relies on greater flexibility and the ability to apply learning in rapidly changing circumstances. Recent innovations in competency-based learning address 21st century needs by focusing on mastery of competencies regardless of “seat time,” providing opportunities to reconsider how educational systems can be structured around learning outcomes. Competency-based learning focuses on achievement or mastery of a set of competencies; this mastery represents the value provided by the educational program, not the number of hours that a learner has spent in a classroom. This shift in focus can generate new currency based on the value of competencies among stakeholders in learning ecosystems.

The “Carnegie unit” was originally defined in the late 19th century as a way of standardizing learners’ high school work to facilitate college admissions (Shedd, 2003). It was broadly adopted in United States postsecondary education as an eligibility requirement for the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching faculty pension system (Laitinen, 2012). Soon the Carnegie unit was adapted to define time-based credit hour units for determining faculty teaching load, as part of the standardization of educational processes and degrees in an industrial era. The credit hour was never intended to measure student learning, but over the years it accrued value as a proxy for student outcomes and as a well-understood, common unit of course and credential time-based processes.

As early as 1906, the Carnegie Foundation explicitly stated the distinction between time spent in a learning process and the learning results attained (Harris, 2002). Ernest Boyer, then president of the Foundation, reiterated this point in 1993 and went on to state that “for far too long education in this country has been based on seat time, not on learning... the time has come to bury once and for all the old Carnegie Unit” (Boyer, 1993).

Nonetheless, so many educational processes rely on the fixed, standardized unit of the Carnegie credit hour that a massive retooling would be necessary to use different methods. Therefore attempts to change educational systems and processes in ways that disrupt credit hour practices face many barriers. The *State of Credentialing* report describes how legacy business models are impeding innovation in credentialing, because as “steps are being taken to improve the use of credentials, most efforts have focused on retrofitting innovations into... major functions—allowing business to continue as usual. However, this is not financially sustainable and new business models are essential to achieving and sustaining large scale change in the credentialing ecosystem.” (State of Credentialing, n.d. “Business Models Evolve Slowly”)

To date, competency-based education (CBE) programs that aim to change embedded educational structures and business models such as financial aid reporting and faculty load are predominantly experimental and not scalable. The *2018 National Survey of Postsecondary Competency-Based Education* showed that both the scope and scale of CBE programs remained limited and small, despite widespread interest in CBE (Findings from the 2018 National Survey of Postsecondary Competency-Based Education, p. 1).

The entrenched nature of the credit hour does not mean that educational processes focused on competencies are not possible and desirable. In fact, critics of the credit hour argue that innovative models

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