Chapter 9
Redefining Higher Education Through Competency–Based Education and Flexible Course Schedules

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ABSTRACT

COVID has impacted the world in so many ways that life may never be "normal" again. What has come out of the pandemic is a trajectory of how we view the workplace and the classroom. With a growing number of people out of work due to the pandemic, many are turning to education to help get a job and improve their skill set. With a growing number of adult learners, higher education must be re-defined and re-evaluated. Even before the pandemic, competency-based education offered the nontraditional student the flexibility of time, pace, and cost to aid in their educational goals. Through this research, higher education is redefined to look at college degrees with a student-focus as opposed to the traditional institutional-focus, specifically in terms of course flexibility, cost savings, and pace.

INTRODUCTION

Today, the world is constantly changing, advancing, and pushing the boundaries of "normal." Before the COVID-19 pandemic, a normal workday might have been an 8-hour day in the office, waiting tables at a restaurant, being a trainer at a gym, or having your own business. The new normal became working from home, being furloughed, laid off from your job, and struggling to keep a business afloat. Moreover, students were no longer in face-to-face classrooms and resorted to Zoom or other learning platforms for classes. During this time, many businesses and schools had to adapt quickly to this new environment. Businesses and schools were forced to make changes quickly and modify the format and delivery of their traditional model.

What has come out of the pandemic is a shift in the trajectory of life. The way things were, pre-pandemic, may never be the same. Work, school, and social environments shifted and people had to move and adapt accordingly. As a result, everyone and every entity had to change to adapt. With change comes a shift in the normal. The United States in particular has faced the largest unemployment rate in history (Klein-Collins & Travers, 2020). Through the COVID-19 pandemic, some companies barely survived, some thrived, and others had to shutter their doors. In response, a significant number of adults will need new skills and will need to redirect their careers. Higher education is needed now, and well into the future. Higher education will need to take a lead role in professional development for reemployment (Klein-Collins & Travers, 2020). Through attaining an education, a student can improve their career prospects, self-esteem, and prepare themselves for challenges in emerging industries (McCall et al., 2020). While companies shift the way they do business, educational institutions must do the same.

Competency-Based Education (CBE) is doing just that. Even before the pandemic, competency-based education changed the way students viewed college and how they can complete their degrees. The pandemic may have just pushed many students and universities to look at competency-based education with more urgency than ever. Competency-based education is an approach to pedagogy that focuses on the concepts and mastery of skills as opposed to seat time or credit hours (Katz, 2015). The assessment of the mastery of the competency can be in the form of formal assessments, portfolio reviews, examinations, or automated evaluations (Katz, 2015). Advocates of the competency-based education approach conclude that this approach provides students with specific workforce skills valued by employers and reduces the cost and time of traditional college (Katz, 2015). Competency-based education is considered by some as a disruptive innovation to higher education that, when done well, brings together faculty, administrators, and leadership to a new equilibrium between affordability and quality (Johnstone & Soares, 2014).

Competency-based education allows students to demonstrate their skills and knowledge through military, work, or classroom performance and measures progress by demonstrating learning outcomes through various forms of assessment as opposed to credit hours of instruction or academic terms (Valenzuela et al., 2016). A student is not completely on their own though; a common practice of academic institutions to facilitate student success includes program-level coaches who support and guide the students through the program and course-level mentors who provide subject matter expertise to students through learning activities (Valenzuela et al., 2016). Students learn at varying places and times in a competency-based education program, and educators provide more personalized learning opportunities to support students and assess their learning when they are ready as they progress at their own pace (Surr & Redding, 2017). Competency-based education is redefining higher education and seeks a paradigm shift to the traditional classroom.

REDEFINING HIGHER EDUCATION

Many people cannot afford college straight out of high school, may not have a community college near their home, or even desire to go to college. Therefore, these people start working and may not ever again think about college. A subset of those people, after working for numerous years, realizes that if they want to advance in their careers, a college degree is needed. However, they feel that they might be too old, have too many responsibilities, or frankly, just do not think they have time. They could be juggling a job, family, volunteer work, and other responsibilities. Many of these people do not feel that they have the

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