

# Meeting Challenges: Competency-Based Education and the Obama 2020 Goal

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Competency-based education (CBE) is an educational system that emphasizes sequential mastery of discrete individual skills or learning outcomes instead of critical analysis or abstract thinking (Evers, Rush, & Berdrow, 1998). This paper will seek to establish CBE as a viable alternative to a traditional four-year bachelor's degree, given the current economic and technological landscape of the United States in the context of the Obama administration's education policy agenda.

## Origins of CBE

The mid-20th century space race between the United States and the USSR is commonly cited as the original impetus for the development of CBE (Hodge, 2007). Although educational behaviorists such as Ralph Tyler and Harold Bloom had already begun to work with training systems that emphasized setting specific educational goals by the late 1940s, the apparent disparity in technological progress between the two nations—highlighted by the launch of Sputnik I in 1957—caused a flood of educational concerns about how America could regain its former scientific supremacy (Morcke, Dornan,

& Eika, 2013).

Increased funding for education research was part of the federal response to these anxieties (Morcke, Dornan, & Eika, 2013). The nation needed more scientists and mathematicians, so a curriculum which aimed to produce specific behaviors and learning outcomes through explicit objectives was developed. CBE has gone through “advocacy and critique cycles” every few decades since its inception, but it has persisted as a model to this day (Morcke, Dornan, & Eika, 2013, p. 855).

Competencies are described as unambiguous and measurable skills (Voorhees, 2001). Throughout the learning process, knowledge and abilities are developed and assessed consistently through demonstrations or testing (Voorhees, 2001). Additional knowledge or abilities are not engaged until sufficient mastery of previous competencies is shown. The linear, scaffolding nature of CBE's design should ideally allow students to progress at their own pace based on proficiency and commitment level. Though CBE has traditionally been associated with teacher education, medical/psychological training, and vocational education (Hodge, 2007), many current initiatives are seeking to expand the implementation of CBE curricula to include a broader group of disciplines.

## Current Policy Goals and CBE

In early 2009, President Obama jointly addressed Congress, establishing a goal for the country to regain its former status as the nation with the highest proportion of college graduates by the year 2020 (White

House Press Office, 2009). Rhetoric around this goal is primarily framed around “education and training needed for the jobs of today and tomorrow,” increasing access, and increasing affordability (White House, 2014, para. 4). Reducing costs, fostering career readiness, and improving transparency are all aims of this initiative, and CBE has the potential to further each of these goals.

Online education is uniquely positioned to employ CBE techniques. Malan (2000) identified six key components of CBE as: (a) explicit learning outcomes and standards for assessment; (b) adjustable time to skill mastery; (c) multiple instructional activities in pursuit of learning; (d) testing outcomes which reference criteria; (e) certification following learning outcome demonstration; (f) student guidance ensured through adaptable program of study. Asynchronous, module-based online education with (a) test gating which limits progression and (b) recognized certification is an excellent example of how current technologies could inexpensively and accessibly provide focused training for the workforce.

Distance CBE reduces the need for a physical plant, and these savings could be passed on to students. CBE promotes access by allowing students of all levels and skills to start in the same place; those who are already proficient can save money by quickly progressing toward certification, in comparison to programs which require a minimum amount of classroom hours. The standardized curriculum and testing central to CBE allow for credentials to be widely

recognized, ensuring that an increasingly mobile population will have a more uniform skillset conducive to efficient business practice. The standard curriculum also allows institutions to hire fewer faculty members and have a higher faculty-student ratio. CBE standards can be quickly rewritten in the event of progress in technology or business practice, allowing for smaller, targeted units of professional development instead of bulkier retraining programs that may include information or skills redundant to an individual worker.

### **Western Governors University**

The most visible current effort to integrate CBE into the higher education environment is the Western Governors University, an online, private, nonprofit school that currently enrolls over 50,000 students (Western Governors University [WGU], 2014a). The university was conceived in 1995 as a cost-effective and accessible method for addressing “rapid population growth confronted by limited public funds for educational services” (WGU, 2014b, para. 2). U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan lauded the institution for its lower-cost model and efficient pathways to degree completion, adding that “while such programs are now the exception, . . . ‘I want them to be the norm’” (Lewin, 2011, para. 18). Today, WGU is accredited by the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities and offers over 50 bachelors- and masters-level programs of study (U.S. Department of Education [USDOE], 2014b).

According to the 2014 College Cost Scorecard, WGU has a below-

average net price, below-average indebtedness for all institution types, a student loan default rate that is only half the average among all institutions (7.70% vs. 14.64%), and a net price change of -11.95% over the years 2008-2010 (most recent data as of an April 2014 update) compared to a 7.75% average institutional increase in net price over the same time period (USDOE, 2014a). These data points alone speak to WGU's relative affordability in comparison to all institution types, but the difference is also seen among consumer competitors. Other large online universities which do not exclusively employ CBE, such as the University of Phoenix Online, show lower six-year completion rates and higher monthly loan payments (USDOE, 2014a). It would be irresponsible to claim that CBE is the causal variable in the absence of statistical regression, but CBE is a compelling example that could certainly be used to influence school choice for prospective students.

### Considerations and Conclusions

CBE is not without its detractors, however. Talbot (2004) reduces the system to "monkey see, monkey do" (p. 587), further arguing that the practice "limit[s] the reflection, intuition, experience, and higher order competence necessary for expert, holistic or well-developed practice" (p. 587). This line of argumentation may have some merit, but the demands of the Obama 2020 goals require some sacrifice. A system that is both cheaper and more efficient will likely be perceived as lower quality than an elite education at a renowned school, but the traditional system will not be able

to affordably meet changing 21st century labor demands as currently forecasted. CBE is a sustainable alternative that needs a stronger voice at the table as policymakers continue to wrestle with options for reform.

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