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COLLEGES LEADING COMPETENCY-BASED REVOLUTION
AGREE ON ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS FOR A SUCCESSFUL PROGRAM

Institutions acknowledge difficulty in key practices; other barriers remain

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Jan. 6, 2016 – Faculty, administrators and staff at colleges and universities with competency-based education (CBE) programs share near universal agreement regarding essential elements of strong CBE programs, according to a new survey from Public Agenda. These include clear program competencies; meaningful assessments; and learner-centered programs that prepare graduates for the workforce. At the same time, respondents from institutions at the forefront of the movement acknowledge it can be difficult to support some of those elements in practice.

CBE programs focus on a student's demonstration of learning rather than time sitting in a classroom. When it comes to specific practices that institutions need to design and support successful CBE programs, 94 percent of participants agree that programs must provide assessments that give students "substantive, meaningful feedback." They also agree that designing programs that are "equally accessible to anyone admitted … regardless of race, income or ability status" is a high-priority practice.

Fully implementing core practices is not always easy. For example, while the majority of those surveyed agreed that meaningful assessments are critically important, just 69 percent said they had fully adopted such assessments. Participants also indicated that some recommended best practices for successful CBE programs may actually hinder institutions looking to implement programs.

Survey of the Shared Design Elements & Emerging Practices of Competency-Based Education Programs is the largest survey to date on CBE in higher education. The survey provides baseline data on the adoption, importance and implementation challenges of core CBE elements.

"The emerging design elements and practices we've identified offer promising approaches to help CBE programs develop healthy, scalable CBE models," said Alison Kadlec, Senior Vice President and Director of Higher Education and Workforce Programs, Public Agenda. "These findings are guideposts for institutions, policymakers, foundations and students about key features needed for successful and robust CBE programs."

The research was supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Public Agenda also collaborated with sponsoring organizations: Competency-Based Education Network (C-BEN), American Council on Education, EDUCAUSE and the Association of American Colleges and Universities (the Sponsoring Organization of Integrative Liberal Learning). Council for Adult and Experiential Learning and Quality Matters were thought partners.

Respondents were asked to weigh the importance of 10 elements that experts say should be part of CBE programs. Overall, 95 percent or more respondents picked clear, specialized competencies, measurable assessments, proficient graduates and a learner-centered focus as the three most important elements. A strong majority agreed that the remaining six elements – including engaged faculty/parents and aligned business systems – also were important. Participants generally ranked flexible staff roles and structure as having low importance, with just 67 percent saying this was an important element.

The survey asked respondents to weigh in on these 10 design elements: Learner-Centered; Clear, Cross-Cutting, and Specialized Competencies; Coherent, Competency-Driven Program and Curriculum Design; Measurable and Meaningful Assessments; Proficient and Prepared Graduates; Engaged Faculty and Partners; Flexible Staffing Roles and Structures; Enabling and Aligned Business Processes and Systems; New or Adjusted Business and Financial Models; and Embedded Process for Continuous Improvement.

When asked which practices had been fully adopted in their CBE programs to support particular elements, participants indicated that even the most important practices might be difficult to implement. For example, while 99 percent of respondents agreed it was critical to establish clear, cross-cutting standards – based on externally established and credible competencies – only 65 percent agreed they had satisfied that goal.

CBE programs are having more success with other practices. For example, 87 percent of respondents said their programs have fully adopted a "credential (degree) based on an appropriate level of mastery." Similarly, 82 percent have adopted program requirements that are aligned "to relevant industry and/or professional standards."

Barriers to Implementation

Three practices stand out in the survey as the most likely to be outright barriers to implementing CBE programs. At 39 percent, the most common barrier cited was having in place "data systems [that] are automated and compatible with one another, eliminating unnecessary frustrations for faculty, staff and learners." The other barriers deal with financial models. More than one in five respondents agreed that it's difficult to give all CBE learners easy access to financial aid and to offer non-traditional pricing models and/or to modify costs in order to increase access and affordability.

"These barriers are not necessarily surprising," added Laurie Dodge, Co-chair of the C-BEN Steering Committee and Vice Provost, Brandman University. "They are rooted in the lack of technical solutions. When an institution seeks to eliminate the credit hour, all systems must change – from faculty structure to financial models and awarding student aid. Until solutions are more common, these barriers will continue to present challenges to institutions adopting CBE models."

While CBE programs are on the rise nationally, the survey also found differences between respondents from public and private not-for-profit institutions. While 70 percent of public institutions that participated in the survey are in the planning stage of a CBE program, that rate is 43 percent for private not-for-profit institutions. The survey also found that 33 percent of participating private not-for-profit institutions are scaling up existing CBE programs compared with 13 percent of public institutions that responded to the survey.

Half of respondents from master's level institutions were in the expansion phase, compared with 39 percent of bachelor's institutions. About half of sub-baccalaureate, doctorial and associate institutions were only in the planning stage.

The *Survey of the Shared Design Elements & Emerging Practices of Competency-Based Education Programs* took place online from July 8, 2015, to August 7, 2015. It was administered to 754 individuals representing 586 programs. The survey response rate was 24 percent, with 324 individuals starting the survey and 179 individuals completing the survey. The survey was administered to only individuals known to be designing or delivering a CBE program.