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APPLIED AND EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Designing a Mechanism to Assess CBE Quality

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Though it's not a new concept, there has been significant growth in recent years in the number of competency-based education (CBE) programs offered at colleges and universities across the United States. These programs are being launched with the intention of accommodating the needs of non-traditional students–but with growth comes the need for standardization. In this interview, Charla Long discusses the Competency-Based Education Network (C-BEN)'s recent efforts to establish a quality framework for CBE, and shares her insights on the future of competency-based education, both inside and outside the learning environment.

The EvoLLLution (Evo): Competency-based education has grown hugely in popularity over the last several years, but it has been around for decades. What are a few of the trends that have driven this recent growth in CBE?

Charla Long (CL): A lot of people are trying to figure out this resurgence, if you will, of competency-based education. If you look at it from a historical perspective, we are on the third generation of CBE. The first was in the 1970s, when early players like Alverno College, Thomas Edison, and Charter Oak began looking at it as a way to better serve adult learners. The second was in the 1990s with WGU, and now we're experiencing this resurgence.

This largely has to do with the fact that institutions are trying to figure out how to better serve students that have left postsecondary education without a credential or aren't engaging in higher education at all.

Often, these are individuals who have significant work experience, but don't have academic credentials to undergird that work experience.

Second, institutions are asking how to better engage with the world outside academia. Employer dissatisfaction with higher ed has been increasing over the last several years, and people are asking things like, "Is higher education really worth it?" and "What's the value of a degree?" Unfortunately, uncertainty around what a person with a degree or credential knows and can do is causing a lot of employers to doubt the value of higher education. The move towards CBE is driven, in part, by institutions trying to make learning more transparent and evident.

Finally, this resurgence is being driven by the availability of technology. We're seeing technological advancements today that didn't exist during prior generations of CBE and these innovations are allowing

competency-based education models to take hold. With these new technologies, institutions aren't having to manually manage the personalization of learning. Instead, new tools are enabling institutions to offer CBE programs in a more personalized manner, and on a greater scale.

Evo: Why is it important, not only from the student's perspective but also from the institutional perspective, to prove the quality of CBE programming?

CL: Whether it's a competency-based or a traditional model of learning, an institution needs to prove the quality of its offerings. We wouldn't assume that just because a program is offered in a traditional manner—that is, on a credit-hour, seat-time-measured basis–that it is high quality. And we can't assume that any given CBE program is of quality either.

Certainly, the need to prove quality exists within the competency-based education movement because, as a movement, we need to be able to prove that CBE is equal to, or better than, comparable traditional offerings. We feel an obligation to prove that what we are offering is producing the intended learner outcomes and delivering on the other value propositions often tied to CBE.

Students and families want to know that when they invest money and time in a program, it's going to yield the results that the institution promises. At the same time, the federal government wants to make sure that financial aid dollars are being well spent, and accreditors want to be assured that the programs they're accrediting meet high standards of quality. So, there's a lot of pressure for institutions to prove the value of a competency-based approach to education. This is why the Competency-Based Education Network has invested significant time in creating the Quality Framework for CBE Programs, which we released in September 2017.

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Institutions often make a number of statements about what CBE can do. For example, you hear it said that CBE allows students to complete programs more quickly. You hear claims like, "CBE allows learners to move at their own pace, spend more time on challenging topics and less time on those that they already know." Also, you hear that CBE allows students to save money. All of these value propositions may prove true, but we need proof to back them up. We have to be able to point to evidence to prove our quality, and to prove we can deliver on those value propositions.

Evo: Let's discuss C-BEN's quality framework for CBE. How do the determinants of quality for a competency-based program differ from those of traditional seat-based offerings?

CL: When we think about quality determinants in CBE, we often use the terminology coined by Paul LeBlanc at Southern New Hampshire University. He talked about how, in CBE, time becomes a variable factor, while learning is the fixed factor—unlike traditional degree programs, where the quality of a program is based on the amount of time a student spends with the material.

In a CBE program, we're measuring success based purely on the learner's demonstration of a given set of competencies. A student progresses on the learning journey when they demonstrate that they know the material. Untethering from time and anchoring learning on the demonstration of competence allows institutions to ensure mastery of the required curriculum.

Recently, C- BEN undertook a two-and-a-half-year initiative to create the Quality Framework for CBE Programs, as mentioned earlier. That framework has eight key elements of program quality, which ultimately hinge on whether or not a program's design is intentional from start to finish.

The framework makes sure

institutions have thought through a wide range of questions, such as:

- Has the institution really thought about how each competency is taught, and where it's being assessed?
- How will students demonstrate competency?
- How does your learning journey incorporate readings, resources and activities needed to move a learner to a place of mastery or proficiency?
- How does the institution build in personalized dimensions based on individual student needs?

We also ask: How did the institution decide what the required competencies are? How did they validate those competencies? How did the institution set the level of mastery needed by a learner? How does an institution know if a person is competent?

Finally, we ask: How did the institution design their program? Was it through a backward design model? Have they really thought methodically about the student's learning journey? Have they designed authentic assessment strategies that mirror the way that someone would have to demonstrate that competency in a non-classroom setting? For the vast majority of competencies, it's difficult to give a pen-and-paper multiple choice exam in a CBE program because that assessment does not mirror the way somebody would demonstrate competency in a work-based setting. Instead, an

institution may give them a time-based project and interrupt them twenty minutes in to say, "I'm so sorry, the boss just called and he wants you to do it like this instead," because that's the way it works in life.

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Those are some of the elements that we look at in our quality framework.

Evo: When we're talking about the outcomes for a competency-based program, is there ever any concern that the skills a student gains wind up being overly tactical or immediate in their usage, as opposed to the theoretical outcomes of a more traditional program, which are sold as being more comprehensive over a longer term?

CL: Yes. There's a risk for this, which is why the quality framework emphasises the development of knowledge, skills and abilities, and intellectual behaviors—not just skills.

In a competency-based program, I would teach you not just the skills and the abilities, but also the knowledge that undergirds those

skills and abilities. We don't just aim to get students into their first job placement. We also want to teach and develop in our learners the knowledge, skills and abilities, and intellectual behaviours needed to be successful over the course of their careers.

That said, we also need to help learners recognize that competence today may not mean competence tomorrow. CBE prepares individuals to be lifelong learners who refine and retool their competencies throughout their professional lives. As people seek to tool up in certain areas, CBE programs are here to help with that. When learners get to a place in their work where their knowledge base needs to be expanded, CBE programs can bring them to that higher level of mastery.

Evo: What would it take to develop a system designed to test and assess the quality of competency-based programming that could be applied on a broader basis?

CL: To design any system, you have to have standards, and that's why C-BEN has developed the quality framework for CBE programs. If you look at the quality framework, it lists the principles, standards, and performance indicators for CBE based on four levels of mastery demonstration. It's very similar to the way that a competency-based education program would work: Here is what we believe ideal performance looks like, and here are the likely steps

that you will need to demonstrate as you move towards that ideal performance. And so, our quality framework can be used by an institution as a step-by-step guide for building a quality program and assessing the quality of existing CBE programs.

For C-BEN, our focus this year is on getting institutions to adopt the framework. We have spent a lot of time with our members and other audiences sharing the tool and asking them to use it, often explaining how they might leverage it as a continuous improvement resource.

As institutions become more acclimated to the quality framework, C-BEN is working with our members to build the evidence base. So, how does an institution prove it's performing at a Level 3 mastery demonstration for coherent program and curriculum design? We're working on building that evidence base for each of the eight quality framework elements, so that an organization can say, "Here's our evidence. Look at it and tell us whether you think we're of quality." Institutions can learn where they may be falling short and make necessary improvements. C-BEN's focus as we move into 2019 will be to collect this performance evidence from across a broad field of institutions.

In the future, C-BEN may want to be able to assess program quality and let institutions, accreditors, regulators, students and employers

know how a school is performing against the quality framework. University presidents often ask me, "How do I know if my institution has built a quality CBE program?" Administrators often aren't familiar with CBE program design, so I think the framework will help give them the resources they need to be confident that their institution is building a solid program.

Evo: Is there anything else you'd like to add about what this kind of framework will mean for our own understanding of quality higher education?

CL: The quality framework will help to assure learners that they're investing in the right educational model to meet their needs. As a learner, if I'm going to invest my time and money, I want to know what I will get out of it. It's not enough for learners to know they'll get a degree. They want an institution that will help them succeed in all of the areas needed personally and professionally. With CBE, a learner must master all competencies. There's no more earning an overall score of 70 percent in a course but scoring 40 percent on the most important thing needed in their future career.

CBE's ability to assure learning is really important, and quality CBE programs can take confidence in saying, "Our learners will be competent in X, Y and Z," because they'll have the proof needed to back up these statements. I think that's the reason many institutions

and learners are moving toward competency-based education.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

To learn more about understanding, planning or enhancing competency-based education on your campus, register for the CBExchange Conference (Sep 25-27) hosted by C-BEN.