

Competency as One Answer

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By **David Schejbal**

Amy Slaton's February 21 essay is a good example of how a well-intentioned effort to defend the value of higher education ends up portraying competency-based education as something it's not and perpetuates the view that there is only one true approach to higher education.

To understand the recent focus on competency-based education, it's important to recognize a few critical realities.

First, the cost of higher education from 1980 to 2010 has risen more than 600 percent -- a rise more rapid than the cost of any other major good or service in the United States, including health care.

Second, state support dropped in 2012 to its lowest rate in 25 years.

Third, technology has yet to generate the dramatic cost savings we've seen in other arenas. For example, in 1900, the average American family spent 50 percent of its income on food and more than half of the American workforce was engaged in farming. Today, food consumes just 8 percent of household income and farming requires only 2 percent of the labor force.

Fourth, the American public has very mixed feelings about higher education. On the one hand, we know that better-educated individuals are happier on average, make better personal financial decisions, suffer fewer spells of unemployment and enjoy better health. On the other hand, there is a widely shared view that higher education is overpriced, inefficient, elitist, and inaccessible.

Fifth, research by Richard Florida (*The Rise of the Creative Class*) and Thomas Friedman (*That Used to Be Us*) and others has shown the importance of higher education to the future welfare of this country, just as global competition is mounting and our worldview is being shaken.

This is the reality in which higher education is operating as it tries to solve the problems of access and cost, while protecting quality and rigor.

Slaton's solution to the cost problem is to typographically shout that higher education should get "MORE MONEY (as in, public funding)."

Unfortunately, shouting and wishing it so seldom works. The fact is that Americans are not willing to spend more money on the public good, let alone agree on what the public good is. The bottom line is that higher education is going to have to help itself; no one is coming to its rescue.

Enter competency-based education. It was introduced in America towards the end of the 1960s, but it applied only to small niche markets. Back then, cost and access were not the acute problems that they have become. The reason that new models are emerging now is that competency-based education is a well-conceived effort to meet at least some of the challenges facing higher education today. It is not the only effort, but it is promising because if done well, it addresses the issues of cost, quality, scaling and individualized learning all at once.

Competency-based education is a team effort. Similar to traditional higher education, faculty continue to be on center stage; they are the experts and the specialists. They set the standards and the criteria for success. They decide what students must know and how they must be able to demonstrate their knowledge in order to qualify for a degree.

Faculty in competency-based education work collaboratively to determine the structure of curriculum as a whole, the levels of competencies, and assessments that best measure competency. When constructed well, a competency-based curriculum is tight, with little ambiguity about how students must perform to demonstrate mastery, move through the program, and qualify for a degree.

The individualized nature of teaching changes. In their relationships with students, faculty function more like tutors and academic quality guarantors, attending to those students who need their expertise the most. Other staff, including advisers, coaches, professional tutors, instructional designers, and others, all pull in the same direction to make the learning and mastery process for students individualized, comprehensive, effective and efficient.

In his January 30 piece on *Inside Higher Ed*, Paul LeBlanc wrote that competency-based education "offers a fundamental change at the core of our higher education 'system': making learning non-negotiable and the claims for learning clear *while making time variable*. This is a profound change and stands to reverse the long slow erosion of quality in higher education."

Competency-based education is not a panacea that will save higher education, but no one claims that it is. It is one approach to higher education that expands students' options for learning and most importantly, expands their access while focusing on what they know and are able to do (instead of focusing on how many hours students spend in a classroom or the number of credits they pay for).

Today 40 percent of college students are nontraditional (U.S. Department of Education): they work full time, they have families, they care for aging parents and they attend to myriad responsibilities that make going to college in the traditional time blocks impractical if not impossible. In addition, many adult students have knowledge and experiences that are worthy of academic recognition that's unavailable through traditional programs.

The view that the status quo is the only correct model of teaching and learning is the kind of hubris that makes higher education appear haughty and conceited, rather than as a vehicle for growth and opportunity. Competency-based education is a viable and important approach that provides students with another option for accessing and benefiting from higher education. We should support its development, and we should strongly encourage students to create ownership of their degrees and allow them to discover their unique identities.

If not this, what else is higher education for?

Bio

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