

Policy on Competency-Based Education and Direct Assessment

Proposed changes further clarify approaches to competency-based education and align with updates to the Policy on Substantive Change and Required Notifications.

Traditional education has historically focused on time as the measure of academic engagement: hours in class, time doing homework or research, internship or practice hours, four-year degrees, and so forth. The federal credit hour definition reflects this time orientation:

- (1) One hour of classroom or direct faculty instruction and a minimum of two hours of out-of-class student work each week for approximately fifteen weeks for one semester or trimester hour of credit, or ten to twelve weeks for one quarter hour of credit, or the equivalent amount of work over a different amount of time;
- or**
- (2) At least an equivalent amount of work as required in paragraph (1) of this definition for other academic activities as established by the institution including laboratory work, internships, practica, studio work, and other academic work leading to the award of credit hours.

Assessment is typically based on relative achievement of broad learning outcomes, with time as the constant.

Competency-based education (CBE) takes an alternate approach, defining learning as the mastery of specific units of knowledge or skill with a clearly defined threshold for success. Time and learning experiences are typically flexible with the measure of performance (achievement target) and outcome fixed—the inversion of the traditional approach to credit hours.

The challenge for institutions and accreditors is establishing assurances of quality and measures of comparability with such contrasting approaches. The purpose of this policy is to identify expectations and provide guidance for evaluating the quality of CBE in a higher education context which is typically measured in credit hours.

Definitions

Competency – a clearly defined, measurable outcome demonstrating achievement of, or proficiency in, a specified unit of knowledge or skill.

Competency-based education – An outcomes-based system of instruction in which the student's demonstrated proficiency in specified knowledge or skills is the basis for measuring satisfaction of course, program, or degree requirements. CBE focuses on the achievement of learning outcomes (what a student knows or can do) as the direct measure of student learning, regardless of time spent in class, study, or research, which is an indirect measure of student learning. Examples of direct assessment instruments include projects, papers, examinations, presentations, performances, and portfolios. Students' progress through the program by

satisfying competencies either at the course level (course/credit approach) or program level (direct assessment approach).

A course requiring time in class, study, research, lab work, internship hours, or other academic engagement which satisfies the ABHE credit hour definition and utilizing competencies to validate outcomes is not competency-based education and not subject to the special requirements of this policy. Such courses should be treated within the context of regular credit hours.

A CBE program may be identified as (1) Course/Credit Approach, (2) Direct Assessment Approach, or (3) Hybrid Approach.

Course/credit approach – An instructional program in which the requirements for individual courses are satisfied through direct assessment—demonstrated achievement of specified competencies apart from any measurement of academic engagement (time in class, study, research, etc.). Students complete courses ~~and~~ credits ~~hours/clock hours~~ through fulfillment of competencies rather than time in academic engagement.

Direct assessment approach – An instructional program that, in lieu of courses, credit hours, or clock hours as a measure of student learning, utilizes direct assessment of student learning or recognizes the direct assessment of student learning by others at the program level. Direct assessment programs are typically self-paced and organized by competencies rather than courses. Transcripts ~~may typically list either~~ program-level competencies achieved ~~or rather than~~ than course equivalents.

Hybrid approach – An instructional program that utilizes the direct assessment approach for fulfillment of a portion of the program and the course/credit ~~hours or clock hours~~ approach for fulfillment of the remainder of the program.

Initiation of CBE programs by course/credit approach, direct assessment approach, or hybrid approach is subject to the ABHE *Policy on Substantive Change and Required Notifications*. A substantive change proposal and Commission on Accreditation (COA) approval is required in each of the following circumstances:

- ~~1. Addition of the first program at an institution where 50% or more of the program is available by the course/credit approach. If 50% or more of a program by the course/credit approach was not in place at the last comprehensive review, the offering of the first program by this approach during the current accreditation cycle is a substantive change.~~
- ~~2. Addition of each competency-based education program where 50% or more of the program will be available by direct assessment.~~
- 2g. First offering of competency-based education courses up to 49% of a program.
- 2h. Addition of the first credential where a student may complete 50% or more by competency-based education in the course-credit approach.

2i. Addition of each competency-based education program where 50% or more is completed by direct assessment.

Evaluation Criteria

A substantive change proposal for CBE should ~~address~~ document the following items, which the COA will use as ~~the~~ review criteria:

1. Program design and the institution's approach to CBE are appropriate to higher education and faculty led. Competencies ~~should be~~ are validated, ~~demonstrate performance proficiency, be~~ appropriate for the subject and degree level, ~~and be~~ and sufficiently numerous to address all outcomes expected from equivalent traditional courses or programs, and demonstrate performance proficiency.
2. The institution ~~must explain~~ explains how it determines credit hours or credit hour equivalents, specifically in relation to competency-based programs, and demonstrates that the assignment of credit hours or credit hour equivalents is warranted and conforms to general practices in higher education.
3. The institution ~~is devoting~~ devotes sufficient faculty and other resources to its CBE programs to support students and faculty. Students ~~should have~~ ongoing access to qualified faculty, student services, and library access/services throughout the period of enrollment.
4. All CBE courses or learning activities include regular (ongoing) and substantive interaction between students and instructors.

Faculty must be qualified by appropriate academic credential and/or experience in the subject matter. Access means direct student contact with faculty for feedback on assignments, assessment, information on course content, and academic advising.

Regular and substantive interaction means that contact will be periodic, predictable, initiated by the professor, and relevant to the academic subject matter. It may include instruction, feedback on assignments, or discussion of subject matter. Optional or strictly student-initiated engagement is insufficient for meeting this expectation.

An institution that wishes to award Federal Student Aid (FSA) funds in a program using the direct assessment approach must apply for approval from the U.S. Department of Education, in addition to securing accreditor approval. The program must meet the requirements of 34 CFR 668.10. An institution may also be required to secure state approval for a CBE program.

Applicable Standards: Standard 7

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