

Competency-Based Education & Assessments

By Cathy Anderson Certificates Competency-Based Education

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If you've read about [competency-based education](#) or CBE, you know that it primarily graduates students based on assessments that measure subject-mastery, rather than "time put in." In a traditional school system, students do not receive degrees and certificates until they have a certain number of credit hours. In a competency-based institution, students can enroll in a course on Day 1 and pass the course on Day 1, if they do well in their assessments. As this type of education system gains popularity, it's critical to better evaluate different types of assessments that can be utilized.

Types of Assessments

Competency-based assessments provide insight in: what the students knows, still needs to learn, has learned, and where the institution can improve. There are three categories of assessments: prior learning assessments, summative assessments and formative assessments. Different competency-based programs are using one or all of these within their educational systems in order to deliver on the promise of an education removed from seat time.

Prior learning assessments (PLAs) test what students have learned [before and outside of the classroom](#). According to the [Center for Adult and Experiential Learning](#), PLA's evaluate what a student has learned "working, participating in employer training programs, serving in the military, studying independently, volunteering or doing community service, and studying open source courseware." Students who pass their PLA can receive college credit, certification, or advanced standing toward further education or training.

I have worked for a couple of educational institutions that provided students with an opportunity to submit portfolios to demonstrate prior learning in a specific subject area. The student would provide information on specific job duties, trainings, and workshops that he or she felt were related to the outcomes of the course in which they were seeking credit. These portfolios were submitted to the faculty member who taught the specific course. The faculty member then reviewed the contents of the portfolio to determine if the PLA met the outcomes of the course. While it may seem that PLAs are awarded somewhat subjectively based on individual professors' evaluations, many schools create their own

Summative assessments provide a summary of what a student has learned [over a given time period](#), such as two weeks into the course or over an entire semester. Summative assessments are typically performed using traditional testing methods such as multiple-choice tests, or using essay or short answers. Summative assessments are what the majority of those in the traditional education system are accustomed to, and are used to evaluate students, but not to offer the student guidance in terms of future learning. A

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standardized test would be a summative assessment.

Formative assessments are used by teachers to help determine the ideal learning path for their students, helping them to personalize and adjust curriculum, assignments and content to what a given student needs. As an example, if a student turns in an essay and a teacher gives the student a grade and a list of comments that can help them improve the draft, this is a formative assessment – it helps the student to improve and gives specific feedback, while also telling the teacher where the student requires the most guidance. Feedback from the instructor is essential to guide the student in their learning plan.

The tools I find most effective in my own instruction are essays, self-reflection, and portfolios, but assessments must make sense for the subject being taught. A portfolio may be ideal for someone focused on design or writing, but difficult or impractical for a math class. Faculty and other subject matter experts from industry can best determine what sort of assessment best measures student competency.

Competency-Based Education and Technology

When it comes to actually implementing assessments, computer-based testing is most effective in diagnostics and personalized learning. The student takes an assessment – usually multiple-choice – and the results indicate where the student needs improvement. One of the most common general adult education tests is the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE). Another is the Test of Essential Academic Skills, offered by ATI Nursing Education and used as an admissions test for many nursing programs.

The concept of personalized learning is now possible because of the technology used to assess students' knowledge in a more formative way, allowing everyone involved to better address education gaps and needs. [Hanover Research](#) states that *“Technology can be used to shorten the feedback loop, which provides students, parents, and educators with timely information that can be used to create an increased understanding of individual student needs related to differentiation and individuation.”*

Assessments at Leading Institutions

The assessment tools used for higher education degree programs are as varied as the institutions that provide the programs. At DePaul University School of New Learning, for example, students' make progress towards a degree by completing portfolios for each course they enroll in. I've conducted a survey of assessment-types used by institutions at the forefront of the competency-based movement. These are the results:

At [Western Governor's University](#) there are no required courses, just required competencies that students must be able to prove. Minimal feedback is given outside of the grading itself – the different assessment areas are treated as summative assessments, with different degrees use different types of questions and assignments:

- *Assignments involving problem solving. (e.g., Science or Information Technology)*
- *Computerized exams consisting of 50 multiple-choice, matching, and other question types. (e.g., Mathematics)*
- *Projects requiring the student to design a lesson plan. (e.g., Teaching)*
- *Reflection essays about case studies. (e.g., MBA)*
- *Research papers on particular topics within the student's field.*

Southern New Hampshire University's [College for America](#) assesses a student's progress

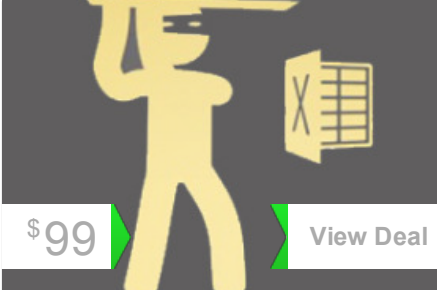


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around nine competency clusters reflecting the priorities employers seek. The goal of this broad-based measuring is to guarantee that graduates are well rounded in all the typical skills that employers will value. They look at the following areas: Communication skills, Critical and creative thinking, Digital fluency and information literacy, Quantitative skills, Personal effectiveness, Ethics and social responsibility, Teamwork and collaboration, Business essentials, Science, society and culture

These broad categories are further divided into 120 specific “competencies” that students must demonstrate in order to graduate. Students are given tasks that they can revise and submit an endless number of times until they can demonstrate mastery in each of these areas. Trained professionals who provide feedback within 48 hours evaluate the tasks, offering formative assessments. These tasks are supplemented by third-party nationally-normed assessments.

Northern Arizona University is taking the lead in implementing a *personalized* learning model. Like other higher education degrees, their new program will also allow students to skip some classes by demonstrating mastery of the material, using a PLA-style model. If the student has a background in a “competency” required for the degree, he or she may be able to skip right over that and move onto an area where he/she is not as knowledgeable.

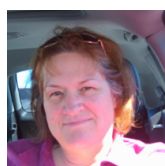
The Increasing Prevalence of CBE

Employers are becoming more knowledgeable about competency-based education. In speaking to employers, most feel the time-based model of education does not necessarily lead to qualified employees – instead, they prefer rigorous testing to find candidates that can demonstrate real skills and competencies. Many are excited about the idea of evaluating a candidate’s work portfolio instead of merely a resume or transcript, as it can better demonstrate if the student has the skills and knowledge to be successful in a job.

As more employers gain comfort with the concept, and assessments continue to grow in quality, we can expect competency-based education to grow broadly as well. It is certainly one of the most disruptive changes to occur in the history of education, and it’s happening now.

By Cathy Anderson

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Cathy has worked in higher education for more than 14 years with experience in Adult Basic Education, English Literacy, Distance Education, and Student Services. She holds a Bachelor’s and Master’s Degree from the University of Wyoming and PhD in Business Administration from Trident University International.

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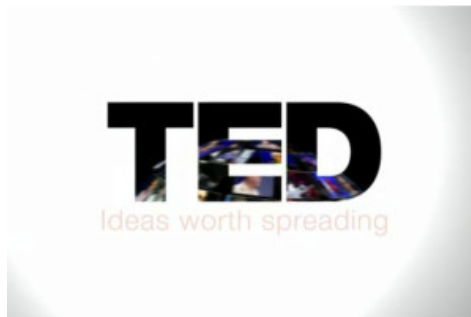
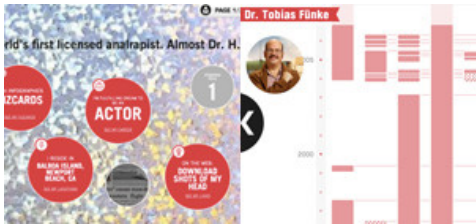
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