How a 40-Year-Old Idea Became Higher Education’s Next Big Thing

By Dan Berrett | OCTOBER 28, 2015

One of higher education’s elder statesmen could see a shake-up coming.

An odd bit of administrative protocol, the credit hour, had outlived its usefulness, he thought. It forced students to bide their time for weeks, months, semesters — even if they had already mastered the material.

They should be free to move through college by demonstrating their achievement, he wrote, instead of deferring to time spent in class. A new day was dawning, wrote Walter A. Jessup, who was the leader of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching — the group responsible for creating the credit hour in the first place.

"American higher education," he predicted, "appears to be well on its way to another stage of development."

That was 1937.
American higher education still hasn’t gotten there.

Meanwhile, the concern that Mr. Jessup outlined has only intensified in the 78 years since, magnified by the growing conviction that a bachelor’s degree is now the ticket to the middle class, the escalating costs of earning a degree, and shifts in demographics that are sending more adult students and those from first-generation and low-income backgrounds to the nation’s campuses.

These pressures are intersecting with another mounting concern: educational quality. Together, these forces are feeding an unusual bipartisan consensus, and they are prompting higher-education leaders to take a fresh look at an old idea: competency-based education. It allows students to make progress at their own pace by demonstrating what they know and can do instead of hewing to the timeline of the semester. While this model has long been used to expand access and lower costs, particularly for adult students, it is now attracting attention as a way to shore up academic rigor.

But this surge in interest has also sparked questions. How effective a method is it for students with varying levels of preparedness, or is it really only suited for the academically talented who can learn on their own? Can it assure educational quality, or is it just being offered to the disadvantaged as a cut-rate version of the full college experience?

The story of how competency-based education has become the latest Next Big Thing after being around for four decades is a tale of timing, of money and politics, and of shifting academic norms.

Advocates for competency-based learning have seen Big Things get hyped in the past, only to flame out. Still, they hope that this model of learning can ultimately achieve a grand goal: staking a claim to, defining, and substantiating quality in higher education.
Just maybe, the new stage of development that Mr. Jessup envisioned decades ago may finally be arriving.

A generation or two after Mr. Jessup’s prediction, a different sort of challenge confronted higher education. The end of the Vietnam War and broadening opportunities for women meant that adults who were older than the core demographic of 18- to 21-year-olds were flocking to college. But with jobs and families, they did not have the luxury of spending hours each week in a classroom.

Competency-based education as a concept began in that era, the 1970s, with programs emerging to serve those older students. Places like Excelsior College (then Regents College), Thomas Edison State College, DePaul University’s School for New Learning, and the State University of New York’s Empire State College were among the first to offer such programs. They wanted to expand access.

Then, as state support for higher education dropped and tuition and student-loan debt rose, so did concerns about cost.

Those two goals, access and cost, have dominated years of efforts to remake higher education. Now, a third goal — educational quality — is driving change.

Competency-based learning may be able to achieve all three goals, say its supporters. And, they add, it is quality that matters most. "Its potential is for a much higher level of quality and a greater attention to rigor," says Alison Kadlec, senior vice president of Public Agenda, a nonprofit organization that is playing a leading role in the growth of this model.

"The worst possible outcome," she said, "would be that competency-based education becomes a subprime form of learning."
Ms. Kadlec and others see historical parallels to past efforts that have hit snags. Online education comes up often as a cautionary tale. In its early days, its full potential, to connect students and make their learning visible, often remained unfulfilled; instead, many instructors simply replicated their lectures online.

**Key Eras of Growth for Competency-Based Learning**

Competency-based learning has been a part of American higher education for over four decades. Here are some key turning points.

**The 1970s**

Institutions like Alverno College, DePaul University’s School for New Learning, Regents College (now Excelsior College), the State University of New York’s Empire State College, and Thomas Edison State College are the first adopters. They seek to make higher education available to a growing population of adult students by using demonstrable outcomes and measures of previously acquired learning to assess what students know. The approach allows students to make progress at their own pace instead of following the traditional academic calendar.

**Late 1990s**

The governors of 11 states agree, in 1997, to create a virtual college to help students acquire training for in-demand jobs like information technology, teaching, and nursing. Western Governors University reaches 71 students in 1999, its first year in operation. By 2015, it enrolls more than 62,000 students. Its scale is enabled by online tools, a competency-based method, and the separation of faculty roles into those who assess learning and those who provide academic coaching.

**Now**

Southern New Hampshire University, in 2013, becomes the first institution approved to award federal financial aid based on students’ demonstrated progress instead of the credit hour. That same year, the University of Wisconsin begins offering its own competency-based program, signaling mainstream acceptance of the idea. A year later, the Competency-Based Education Network forms. The coalition of 17 institutions and two state systems seeks to share information on this method of learning, guide its development, and stake out principles for high-quality programs. Now nearly 600 institutions are now seriously exploring competency-based education.
That account was echoed by Linda M. Harasim, a professor of communications at Simon Fraser University, who was an early adopter of online teaching and has chronicled its evolution. She initially hoped that online teaching would enable students to collaborate and network with one another, and make education more effective.

Instead, she says, administrators saw online learning as a way to cut costs, particularly in its early years. "Online was simply more efficient," Ms. Harasim says. "We didn’t think about it being more effective."

The trajectory of community colleges decades ago also suggests parallels to competency-based learning today. Community colleges dwelt for decades on the margins until their moment arrived, in the 1960s, with an average of one new community college opening nearly each week.

The goal of increased access inspired much of the growth, says John E. Roueche, president of the Roueche Graduate Center at National American University and an emeritus professor of community-college leadership at the University of Texas at Austin. "So many colleges got committed to notions of equity, access, and opportunity, and ‘Come on in the water’s fine,’” he says. But they paid too little attention, he argues, to ensuring that students succeeded once they got there. Quality suffered.

"The results of that were just pitiful," he says. "Atrocious attrition."

For years, access and affordability continued to be the chief goals for competency-based-education providers. They inspired the founding, in 1997, of Western Governors University, when the governors of 11 states signed on to a virtual college that would allow students, chiefly in remote areas, to acquire skills for in-demand jobs in fields like information technology, teaching, and nursing.
People could gain inexpensive access to a practically focused education at a time of decreasing public spending. The model called for technology-enabled, self-paced learning using the competency-based approach.

The idea took a little while to gain traction. Enrollment didn’t crack 1,000 for four years, but then it took off.

A decade later, Western Governors had more than 40,000 students. This year, enrollment topped 62,000.

Western Governors has become the colossus of the field, and it has spawned, in unforeseen ways, much of the recent interest in competency-based learning.

A decade ago, during debate over the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, Western Governors pressed the federal government to tweak regulations so that financial aid could be awarded to students in competency-based programs that weren’t tied closely to the credit hour. Instead, money could be made available for something called direct assessment. It meant that a college could measure what a student knows and can do, and allow the student to proceed and receive aid accordingly. Mastery of skills or content could be demonstrated by things like projects, papers, examinations, presentations, performances, and portfolios.

The tweak was one item among a slew of regulatory decisions made about accreditation. But it forced people to think through how a pure competency-based approach fits in the context of traditional regulations.

"It was," says Michael J. Offerman, a former president of Capella University who advised the Education Department on the new rules, "the first time any of us had to wrestle with what direct assessment meant." No groundswell of interest
followed the change. Western Governors even declined to use it; the credit hour was still the common currency, and the government had yet to issue guidance to help colleges makes sense of the new language.

Seven years later, Southern New Hampshire University became the first institution to apply for consideration as a direct-assessment provider. It was approved the following year, and just a few others have followed. But what ultimately mattered most was the broader signal that the Education Department was receptive to innovation. Momentum has clearly accelerated since then.

In 2013, the University of Wisconsin started offering a homegrown version of the competency-based model, called the Flexible Option. It allows students to earn competency-based versions of an associate degree in arts and science, and bachelor’s degrees in nursing, biomedical sciences diagnostic imaging, and information science and technology. Nearly 500 have enrolled.

For many observers, Wisconsin’s foray into competency-based learning marked that model’s entry into higher education’s mainstream. For months, administrators in Wisconsin’s extension program fielded multiple calls each day from other colleges seeking advice.

Other public institutions, including Purdue University and the University of Michigan’s medical school in Ann Arbor, have since adopted competency-based approaches in interdisciplinary and health programs, respectively. Last year, the University of Maine at Presque Isle made this approach the standard for all of its programs.

Meanwhile, state and federal politicians have been trumpeting competency-based learning’s promise.
President Obama has highlighted it. In a major policy speech in Buffalo in 2013, he laid out his agenda for higher education. His ideas for rating colleges and tying students’ loan repayment to their earnings dominated the headlines, but the president also made a point of encouraging colleges to innovate. His first example was competency-based learning, referring specifically to what Southern New Hampshire and Wisconsin were doing.

"The idea would be if you’re learning the material faster, you can finish faster, which means you pay less and you save money," he said, to applause.

Southern New Hampshire and Wisconsin belong to a network of providers that are working together to lead the competency-based model’s growth. Instead of being isolated actors doing their own thing, says Amy Laitinen, director for higher education at New America, a think tank, institutions are working together. "They want to affiliate and grow the movement and the field," she says.

Ms. Laitinen’s 2012 paper, "Cracking the Credit Hour," has been widely credited with crystallizing the shortcomings of the existing system and the need for an alternative (she also seized on Walter Jessup’s and the Carnegie foundation’s early recognition of the credit hour’s failings).

Persuasion alone won’t spark the growth of competency-based education. Its advocates have come to believe that it also needs a firm push. "It could play out organically," Ms. Laitinen says, "but we want it to happen intentionally."

'There's a real danger in being seduced by innovation without

The Lumina Foundation has been a major player in this bid for intentionality, donating $13 million over the past two years, chiefly to support efforts to bring together institutions and policy
making sure the quality piece has been paid attention to.'

out of concerns about educational quality, says Kevin M. Corcoran, Lumina’s strategy director. That mode of education emerged as a natural outgrowth of Lumina’s work in recent years to champion two efforts, the Degree Qualifications Profile, which sets out the skills and knowledge that students should achieve during their pursuit of different degrees, and Tuning, which seeks to determine the core material and skills for particular disciplines. About 600 colleges nationally have adopted these two efforts, and faculty members have been at their core, defining and assessing what matters in student learning.

Lumina and Public Agenda have modeled their work on health-care reform. Each quarter, they bring together academic leaders, usually at the Hilton at O’Hare airport, to kick off recurring 90-day cycles in which they design experiments, analyze the results, and report on findings. The group has focused on big questions: How can it identify good program design or assessment? How do colleges’ processes and business practices need to change? What evidence base do they need to demonstrate educational quality?

Some basic principles of quality and rigor have emerged, says Charla S. Long, a higher-education consultant working with Public Agenda. Among them: careful planning of courses and programs, with faculty members’ roles designed to take full advantage of their time and talents. Assessments, she added, should be
reliable and tied to what matters to each discipline. They should be administered frequently, informally, and summatively, not as a single, high-stakes exam. "One test isn’t quality," she says.

While these principles have been guiding many programs, the people who run them recognize that solid evidence is still needed. "We haven’t had enough players to substantiate data," says Ms. Long.

But that is starting to change.

New programs keep emerging. A pair of participants in the Lumina-funded network started offering a degree together in organizational leadership last year, to stave off an anticipated shortfall of middle managers in the Rio Grande Valley. The partnership of South Texas College and Texas A&M University at Commerce has experienced unexpectedly strong demand, and some friction with faculty, both of which illustrate the model’s promise and the lingering barriers to change.

Students can pursue the degree on either campus. South Texas’s program began last year with 40 students, and 22 of them graduated. Administrators projected that enrollment this year would double, to 80. Instead, it hit 181.

Faculty members at both colleges worked together to develop curriculum, determining what students should be able to do at the end of their courses and then working backward to identify the learning outcomes for general-education requirements and for specialized subjects like organizational behavior and change management. Pearson, the publishing company, is responsible for providing the assessments and assignments for each competency.

Not all faculty members have bought into the idea. Five of the approximately 30 instructors who initially committed to the program have dropped out, says Kevin M. Peek, an economics professor and chair of the bachelor’s program at South
Texas. "Even more problematic," he continued, were the several others who were "unwilling to even consider the possibility of collaborating with us."

Rosemond A. Moore, chair of the accounting, economics, and business-administration program at South Texas, often visited other departments to promote the partnership. Some of her colleagues loved the notion of competency-based learning, she said, and wanted to expand it beyond the joint effort with A&M. At other meetings, she says, "I’d go and literally take a pounding. I’d come out beaten and bruised."

Professors asked her if the program was rigorous or of high-Enough quality. It also seemed to unsettle their sense of their roles. "Because it was so different," she says, "they felt like the power was being taken away from them."

The pacing of the program is individualized, with students proceeding through the syllabus according to their own timeline, focusing on curricular areas they choose and as it fits their schedule.

Mr. Peek described a typical exchange of messages he has with students. "You might be talking today about banking. A little later you’re discussing imports and exports. With another, it’s supply and demand," he said. "You have 10 or 11 students asking you different things at different times."

It may not be the kind of professorial work he originally envisioned doing, but he sees its benefits for students. "The instructor ends up being a facilitator more than a traditional teacher," he said. The program, he added, "is a logical, organic extension of how education is evolving."

Rebecca Olympia Millan, an associate professor of English at South Texas, can see its value, too, as well as its shortcomings.
The model works, she says, for some students — the self-motivated, and those who already know the material or can teach themselves. There are those whose progress would be derailed if stretched out over time, says Ms. Millan, who has seen that happen plenty of times. Many students, she says, could have plowed through the material if given the option.

"They know this stuff," she says. "A lot of times, they don’t need me."

She also worries about when competency-based learning is not carried out effectively. When programs are too compartmentalized, they become examples of what she calls the "McDonaldization" of education, where the instructor does little more than check off a box affirming that a student knows the material. That approach doesn’t work for a lot of students.

"I see a dichotomous picture play out," Ms. Millan says. "Either they succeed or they don’t."

Many more competency-based programs are sure to come.

Hundreds of faculty members and administrators gathered in Phoenix this fall for what was billed as the first meeting of its kind, of a broad swath of competency-based providers. It was organized by Public Agenda and supported by higher education’s rising powers and old guard: Lumina, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Educause, the American Council on Education, and the Association of American Colleges and Universities.

Nearly 600 institutions are seriously exploring this mode of learning, a huge jump from three years ago, when about 20 colleges were offering it, according to Mr. Offerman, who has studied the model’s growth and development. Seven colleges have won approval from the Education Department to award financial aid for
students who earn credits on the basis of demonstrated learning instead of time. Another three institutions are being considered. Four state systems of higher education are taking a close look at adopting the mode of learning.

The conference seemed to fill a need; a majority of attendees were there as newcomers, hoping to connect to others and looking for help in building a program. For many longtime observers of competency-based learning, the conference marked an exciting and fraught moment. The meeting signaled energy and progress, and also risk. "There’s a real danger," Ms. Laitinen said, "in being seduced by innovation without making sure the quality piece has been paid attention to."

Perhaps, in a decade or two, every degree program will use the language of competency, and students will be working in a new currency of learning, one in which they are able to substantiate what they know and can do.

Short of that, some like Mr. Offerman hope, the legacy could be simpler, providing a model for greater experimentation with financial aid and more flexibility and innovation permitted by regulators.

But many government officials remain cautious, even as the Education Department has shown its willingness to experiment. An audit by the department’s Office of Inspector General in September raised concerns about the role of faculty members and about the frequency and nature of the contact between instructors and students. Similarly, some critics of competency-based learning fear its broader implications for education; while they concede that this approach may encourage faculty to set clear standards about what students know — thereby establishing a "floor" of quality assurance — it can also place a low ceiling on expectations.
Writing 78 years ago, Mr. Jessup’s colleagues at the Carnegie foundation emphasized how much teaching matters. It is more than a process of checking off boxes attesting that students learned, on their own, at some point.

"His business is not to check knowledge," they wrote, describing the job of a professor. Instead it is "to put matters in true perspective, to explain less obvious connections and relationships, to open up fresh insights, and to trace unsuspected applications that will cause ideas to put down permanent roots.

"His purpose," they continued, "should be to lead the way from knowledge to wisdom."

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