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Meeting Challenges: Competency-Based Education and the Obama 2020 Goal

Joseph Thomas

Competency-based education (CBE) is an educational system that emphasizes sequential mastery of discrete individual skills or learning outcomes instead of critical analysis or abstract thinking (Evers, Rush, & Berdrow, 1998). This paper will seek to establish CBE as a viable alternative to a traditional four-year bachelor’s degree, given the current economic and technological landscape of the United States in the context of the Obama administration’s education policy agenda.

Origins of CBE

The mid-20th century space race between the United States and the USSR is commonly cited as the original impetus for the development of CBE (Hodge, 2007). Although educational behaviorists such as Ralph Tyler and Harold Bloom had already begun to work with training systems that emphasized setting specific educational goals by the late 1940s, the apparent disparity in technological progress between the two nations—highlighted by the launch of Sputnik I in 1957—caused a flood of educational concerns about how America could regain its former scientific supremacy (Morcke, Dornan, & Eika, 2013).

Increased funding for education research was part of the federal response to these anxieties (Morcke, Dornan, & Eika, 2013). The nation needed more scientists and mathematicians, so a curriculum which aimed to produce specific behaviors and learning outcomes through explicit objectives was developed. CBE has gone through “advocacy and critique cycles” every few decades since its inception, but it has persisted as a model to this day (Morcke, Dornan, & Eika, 2013, p. 855).

Competencies are described as unambiguous and measurable skills (Voorhees, 2001). Throughout the learning process, knowledge and abilities are developed and assessed consistently through demonstrations or testing (Voorhees, 2001). Additional knowledge or abilities are not engaged until sufficient mastery of previous competencies is shown. The linear, scaffolding nature of CBE’s design should ideally allow students to progress at their own pace based on proficiency and commitment level. Though CBE has traditionally been associated with teacher education, medical/psychological training, and vocational education (Hodge, 2007), many current initiatives are seeking to expand the implementation of CBE curricula to include a broader group of disciplines.

Current Policy Goals and CBE

In early 2009, President Obama jointly addressed Congress, establishing a goal for the country to regain its former status as the nation with the highest proportion of college graduates by the year 2020 (White
House Press Office, 2009). Rhetoric around this goal is primarily framed around “education and training
needed for the jobs of today and tomorrow,” increasing access, and
increasing affordability (White House, 2014, para. 4). Reducing costs,
fostering career readiness, and
improving transparency are all aims of
this initiative, and CBE has the
potential to further each of these
goals.

Online education is uniquely positioned to employ CBE techniques. Malan (2000) identified six key
components of CBE as: (a) explicit
learning outcomes and standards for
assessment; (b) adjustable time to skill
mastery; (c) multiple instructional
activities in pursuit of learning; (d)
testing outcomes which reference
criteria; (e) certification following
learning outcome demonstration; (f)
student guidance ensured through
adaptable program of study.
Asynchronous, module-based online
education with (a) test gating which
limits progression and (b) recognized
certification is an excellent example of
how current technologies could
inexpensively and accessibly provide
focused training for the workforce.
Distance CBE reduces the need
for a physical plant, and these savings
could be passed on to students. CBE
promotes access by allowing students
of all levels and skills to start in the
same place; those who are already
proficient can save money by quickly
progressing toward certification, in
comparison to programs which
require a minimum amount of
classroom hours. The standardized
curriculum and testing central to CBE
allow for credentials to be widely
recognized, ensuring that an
increasingly mobile population will
have a more uniform skillset
conducive to efficient business
practice. The standard curriculum also
allows institutions to hire fewer faculty
members and have a higher faculty-
student ratio. CBE standards can be
quickly rewritten in the event of
progress in technology or business
practice, allowing for smaller, targeted
units of professional development
instead of bulkier retraining programs
that may include information or skills
redundant to an individual worker.

Western Governors University

The most visible current effort to
integrate CBE into the higher
education environment is the Western
Governors University, an online,
private, nonprofit school that currently
enrolls over 50,000 students (Western
Governors University [WGU], 2014a).
The university was conceived in 1995
as a cost-effective and accessible
method for addressing “rapid
population growth confronted by
limited public funds for educational
services” (WGU, 2014b, para. 2). U.S.
Secretary of Education Arne Duncan
lauded the institution for its lower-cost
model and efficient pathways to
degree completion, adding that “while
such programs are now the exception,
. . . ‘I want them to be the norm’”
(Lewin, 2011, para. 18). Today, WGU
is accredited by the Northwest
Commission on Colleges and
Universities and offers over 50
bachelors- and masters-level programs
of study (U.S. Department of
Education [USDOE], 2014b).

According to the 2014 College
Cost Scorecard, WGU has a below-
average net price, below-average indebtedness for all institution types, a student loan default rate that is only half the average among all institutions (7.70% vs. 14.64%), and a net price change of -11.95% over the years 2008-2010 (most recent data as of an April 2014 update) compared to a 7.75% average institutional increase in net price over the same time period (USDOE, 2014a). These data points alone speak to WGU’s relative affordability in comparison to all institution types, but the difference is also seen among consumer competitors. Other large online universities which do not exclusively employ CBE, such as the University of Phoenix Online, show lower six-year completion rates and higher monthly loan payments (USDOE, 2014a). It would be irresponsible to claim that CBE is the causal variable in the absence of statistical regression, but CBE is a compelling example that could certainly be used to influence school choice for prospective students.

Considerations and Conclusions

CBE is not without its detractors, however. Talbot (2004) reduces the system to “monkey see, monkey do” (p. 587), further arguing that the practice “limit[s] the reflection, intuition, experience, and higher order competence necessary for expert, holistic or well-developed practice” (p. 587). This line of argumentation may have some merit, but the demands of the Obama 2020 goals require some sacrifice. A system that is both cheaper and more efficient will likely be perceived as lower quality than an elite education at a renowned school, but the traditional system will not be able to affordably meet changing 21st century labor demands as currently forecasted. CBE is a sustainable alternative that needs a stronger voice at the table as policymakers continue to wrestle with options for reform.

References


Joseph Thomas (B.A., College of William & Mary; M.A., Emerson College) is a Ph.D. student in the Department of Educational Policy, Planning, & Leadership at the College of William & Mary. His research interests include arts education, the history and development of drama schools and music conservatories, and online learning.