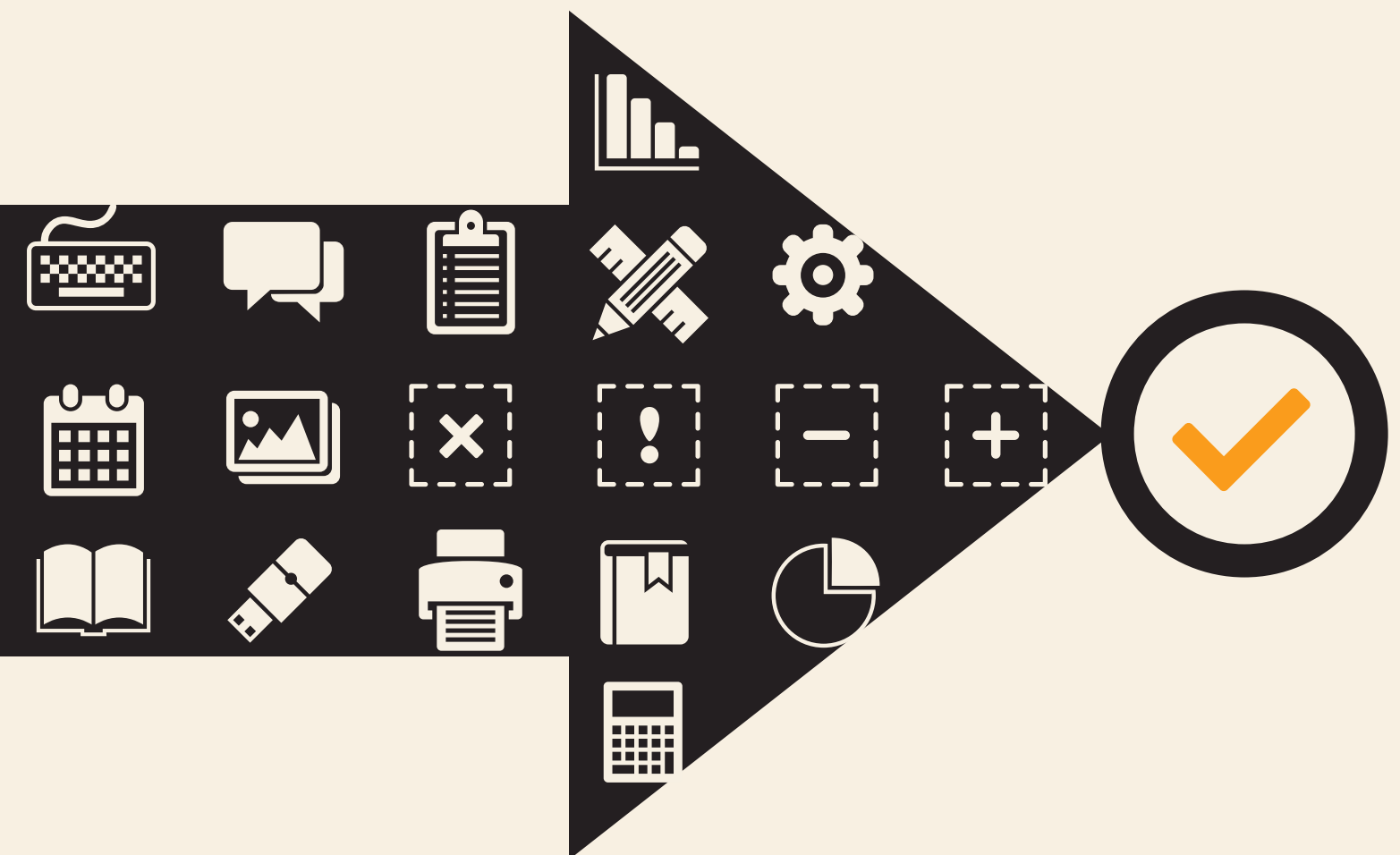


# PUTTING STUDENTS FIRST:

## THE CASE FOR

# COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION

Competency-based Education allows institutions to ensure more students complete credentials in *less time*, at *lower cost*, with a focus on *real learning* that leads to *greater employability*. This versatile model of education benefits the student, the instructor, the institution, and the economy.



## Why Competency-based Education?

We are faced with a severe skills gap that is weakening the economy.

- *By 2018, two-thirds of jobs in the United States will require a post-secondary degree.*<sup>1</sup>
- *Within four years, the number of jobs available to post-secondary graduates will increase by two million.*<sup>1</sup>
- *Current estimates suggest millions of jobs are going unfilled because employers cannot find applicants with the skills needed. Most of these jobs require post-secondary skills.*<sup>1</sup>
- *Yet, approximately 60 million Americans in the workforce lack a college degree, of which 37 million have actually completed some college, but dropped out with nothing to show for it except debt.*<sup>2</sup>

Many students begin college only to find themselves derailed by an assembly line-like education system that presents them with a one-size-fits-all model tied to credit hours and semesters. They are part of a system in which seat time is the constant, and learning is the variable. The result is escalating costs and increased time-to-degree.

## Competency-based Education offers a more affordable and accelerated path to degrees that are 21st-century relevant.

Most students obtain excessive amounts of credits to reach associate and baccalaureate degrees. This adds to both the cost and time required to achieve a degree. With competency-based approaches:

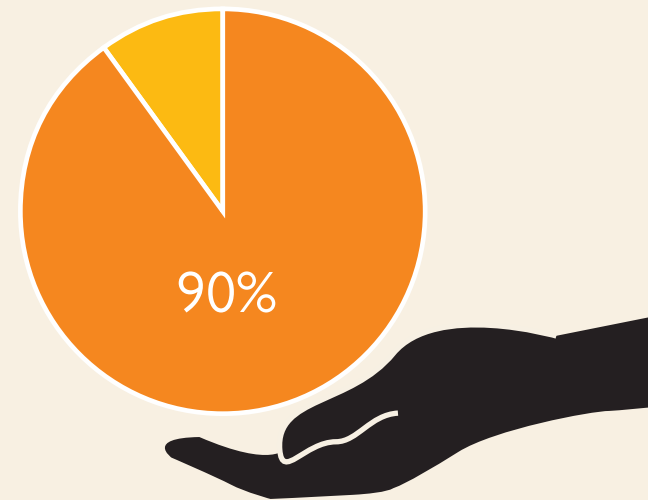
- *Students are given the opportunity to show what they know and what they can do, and can be given credit for the skills they have already mastered.*
- *Students only take the elements of a course they need. This leads to accelerated course completion, and eliminates the need for a rigid four-year program of study.*
- *Credits can be transferred more efficiently. This is critical in today's world, where most students attend more than one institution in the course of their higher education experience.*<sup>3</sup>
- *Employers have greater incentive to invest in employee education. Knowing they are paying for the acquisition of skills that are directly aligned with their organizations' needs, employers will be more likely to see higher education as a worthwhile expense.*
- *Innovative models have shown that the capacity to serve more students can be increased, and cost-per-student reduced by using some blend of online/self-paced modules, tutors (online and on-ground) and classroom teaching.*
- *Students completing competency-based degrees may pay less than they would for the average traditional degree. Western Governor's University, for example, requires approximately \$6,000 per year for most degrees. The average time to graduation at WGU is 30 months for a bachelor's degree, compared to 60-month programs at other institutions.*

## What is Competency-based Education?

Competency-based Education is a model of education that uses learning, not time, as the metric of student success. Focusing on competencies derived from the skills proven to be most relevant by educators and employers, students acquire competencies and credits (often in an online, self-paced environment) while also earning credit for prior learning, thus accelerating their progress toward a credential. In short, Competency-based Education approaches can be more student-centered: meeting students where they are and focusing on the learning they need.

## Competency-based Education produces more employable graduates.

Having attained skills in degrees that are better aligned with 21st-century careers, graduating students of competency-based programs should be better able to find jobs and succeed in the workforce while reducing employer training costs.



“Ninety percent of employers rate WGU graduates' preparation for the workforce as “Good” or “Excellent.” ”

*From Western Governor's University, an institution that has adopted Competency-based Education.*

Competency-based Education opens the doors to education for millions of students currently being left behind. Their talents are required if we are to succeed as a country.

- *Seventy-five percent of today's undergraduates are juggling family, work and school.* <sup>4</sup>
- *Four-out-of-five wealthy 24-year-olds already have a four-year college degree. Only slightly more than a third in the second highest income quartile have a degree and that percentage drops to 11 percent for the lowest income quartile.* <sup>5</sup>

The skills gap can only be eliminated and the workforce of the future developed through increased postsecondary opportunity for lower-income people, many of whom are in the fastest-growing segments of our population.

Blended learning formats used in competency-based programs not only put less strain on brick-and-mortar institutions, but also increase capacity to serve more students and afford greater flexibility to students managing complex lives.

When competencies are organized into a clear pathway that leads to a relevant, high-value degree, students better understand the value of the learning process and the importance of each competency attained as a step on the path to success. Such clear pathways have been shown to especially increase the success of the low-income and first-generation students who will comprise the workforce of the future.

With Competency-based programs, rigorous and relevant learning is king.

Competency-based Education puts clearly defined, measurable, and actionable knowledge and skills at the center of the educational experience so that progress can be measured and quality assurance of curriculum is possible.

A student-centered, learning-intensive system will contain college costs for the student and the federal/state governments while increasing capacity to allow more students to attain higher value degrees.



Competency-based Education is gaining traction in higher education.

In spite of perceived or existing barriers to the implementation of this viable and effective educational model, Competency-based Education is more than just a dream for the future of education. Innovative institutions, including many Pearson partners, are currently implementing or exploring implementation of competency-driven models of education despite the risks and constraints imposed by current higher education policy:

### *Western Governor's University:*

WGU, a Pearson partner and the first accredited school to implement a competency-based model, has created a truly dynamic online learning environment. This model is flexible for the needs of WGU's inherently non-traditional student demographic, and caters to multiple learning modalities. WGU has no "traditional" class sessions or professors. Instead, students work through licensed content at their own pace, with guidance from mentors. How do we know WGU's model is successful? WGU seniors, in 2011-2012, scored higher than 78 percent of institutions participating in The Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA). WGU's value-add score, which measures incremental learning, was higher than that of 93 percent of participating institutions. Furthermore, 100 percent of employers that hired WGU graduates report that those employees were prepared for their jobs, with 97 percent saying the employees met or exceeded their expectations. Employed WGU graduates reported a net increase in income, compared with income prior to enrollment. 2010-2012 graduates reported, on average, a net increase of \$9,000 in salary. [www.wgu.edu](http://www.wgu.edu)

### *Northern Arizona University:*

Through a partnership with Pearson, NAU has created the region's first competency-based online learning degree program as part of the institution's new Personalized Learning Division. NAU courses in this program allow students to receive credit for prior learning and experience, and take place in a self-paced format with faculty assistance readily available. NAU expects to enroll approximately 10,000 students in 90 competency-based courses as part of three fully online baccalaureate degrees over the next several years. [www.nau.edu](http://www.nau.edu)

## Kentucky Community and Technical College System “Direct2Degree” Program:

Through the “College One Course at a Time” system, Pearson partner KCTCS is reaching more students and helping Kentucky fulfill its legislative mandate to reach the national average in educational attainment by 2020. The Direct2Degree (D2D) program embraces competency-based “Learn-on-Demand” courses to boost both capacity and completion rates. With 81 modules leading to a transferrable associate degree, D2D is reducing costs and eliminating the accumulation of unnecessary credits for its students.

[www.kctcs.edu](http://www.kctcs.edu)

## Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board:

THECB and College for All Texans have partnered with Pearson, Texas A&M University-Commerce, and South Texas College, to create a unique, competency-based Bachelor of Applied Sciences (BAS) in Organizational Leadership. This Texas Affordable Baccalaureate (TAB) project aligns with Texas’ vision of creating more affordable, competency-based programs for Texans. Working closely with faculty, Pearson is designing 90 credit-hours of online courses, providing custom curriculum and instructional design that meets the required competencies of the institutions. This progressive program, launching in the fall of 2013, will serve as many as 2,000 students in its first year.

[www.thecb.state.tx.us](http://www.thecb.state.tx.us)

## The road to making a learning-centered, student-focused educational model commonplace requires changes in policy and practice.

Like any innovative practice, Competency-based Education brings its fair share of challenges to the existing system, and growing pains for those institutions that choose to embrace it. Reaping the benefits of a system that improves access and affordability for the 21st-century student requires:

- *The drafters of higher education reauthorization legislation to comprehensively redesign Higher Education Act programs to support expansion of the model.*
- *An overhaul of federal and state financial aid systems that currently are deeply tied to time-based eligibility criteria, to allow for aid tied to mastery of competencies.*
- *The Department of Education to use its experimental site authority to allow demonstration projects to test the impact of various competency-based models on student success and college costs. These projects will provide effective, scalable strategies for addressing changing faculty roles and compensation plans, technology and infrastructure support, and other tactical implementation challenges.*
- *The development of clear criteria for accreditation of competency-based programs, including direct assessment approaches such as the one recently approved for Southern New Hampshire University. Development of these criteria requires the Department, accreditors and innovative institutions to collaborate and use the findings from experimental sites to create transparent, streamlined regulations containing appropriate consumer protections.*
- *Reallocation of innovation funds to support the design and development start-up costs for competency-based programs. Eligibility for these start-up funds should be tied to the creation of sustainable business models by institutions and higher education systems.*

For a more in-depth look at the issues put forth in this briefing, read “Cracking the Credit-Hour”, a paper by the New America Foundation and Education Sector.

---

To learn more about how your institution can partner with Pearson to develop Competency-based Education programs that improve achievement and affordability, visit

[www.pearsononlinelearning.com](http://www.pearsononlinelearning.com)

---

<sup>1</sup> “Help Wanted: Projections of Jobs and Education Requirements Through 2018”, Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 2010

<sup>2</sup> “A Stronger Nation Through Higher Education: How and why Americans must achieve a Big Goal for college attainment”, Lumina Foundation, 2012

<sup>3</sup> “The Road Less Traveled? Students Who Enroll in Multiple Institutions”, United States Department of Education, Center for National Education Statistics, 2005

<sup>4</sup> “Time is the Enemy: The surprising truth about why today’s college students aren’t graduating...and what needs to change”, Complete College America, 2011

<sup>5</sup> United States Census, 2010