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Faculty Perspectives: The Diffusion of Competency-Based Education

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Abstract: This roundtable is a dialogue of faculty perspectives concerning competency-based education. Adult educators facilitating in graduate programs may want to pay close attention to the transformation across the nation related to degree completion as many of our learners will be at the forefront of addressing these issues and implementing change.

Introduction

As Complete College America initiatives permeate community colleges and universities, administrators and faculty will be pressed to reexamine the way that degrees are acquired. This paradigm shift in higher education is moving beyond the minimal credit attainment through AP courses or CLEP and Dantes exams and has the potential to completely revolutionize how credit hours are earned and entire degrees are obtained.

Literature Review

Klein-Collins (2007) explained that the Council of Adult and Experiential Education (CAEL) developed systems to award college credit for what people learn outside the classroom through corporate training, work experience, civic activity, and independent study for over the past thirty years. CAEL and other similar entities have served many institutions of higher learning and have helped them to utilize testing, prior learning assessment, and other forms of competency-based learning. Competency-based education (CBE) awards credit based on mastery of clearly-defined competencies and stands in contrast to learning that is structured around seat time (Educause Learning Initiative, 2014). Though this type of education has been in existence for decades, the pressure to replace the current system in higher education has become noteworthy and will likely continue to occur over the next several years. Carlson (2013) described how competency-based learning is widely used by private institutions, but Wisconsin became one of the first major public universities to take on this controversial form of degree attainment. The Flex-Option could help a significant number of adults cross the college finish line- an important goal in Wisconsin, which lags behind neighboring states in percentage of adults with college diplomas. Other state systems have been following Wisconsin's lead and changing the way that undergraduate degree programs are structured.

Current funding models through credit hour production, financial aid classification, and instructional methods may all be threatened by this transformation to competency-based education. Yet, there are new ideas about how education could be enhanced through this way of measuring learning. Cambridge (2008) wrote how competencies can be seen not simply as a means for articulating the institution's expectations to learners, but more centrally as a means for connecting individual reflection with organizational learning where each is accountable to the other. Distance learning management systems can be utilized to streamline assessment and offering competency-based programs may be one way to be more responsive to a variety of learners. Jiang, Parent, and Easmond (2006) illustrated how problem-based courses with intensive student-instructor interaction were more conducive for our competency-based online distance learners, especially in the early stages of their programs.

Preparing adult graduate learners for the roles they will encounter is a challenge as there are so many varied ways they serve in corporate, non-profit, and higher education environments.

Regardless of the setting though, adult educators often work in positions that necessitate them to instigate change. “As adult educators we need to be flexible in response to the changing needs of adult learners and ready to provide the educational opportunities they need when they are needed” (Schmidt, 2013, p. 80). Though philosophies of faculty are varied when it comes to breaking with tradition for more flexible forms of education including accelerated, distance, and competency-based learning models, it is evident that these types of initiatives are altering higher education settings for adults as well as for the traditional-aged population and that they cannot be ignored.

Methodology

A mixed-methodology, comparative analysis will be employed for the initial phase of this research. The following three questions highlight the goals of this research:

1. Is quality education being eroded through competency-based programs?
2. How can competency-based credit options be presented to faculty and administrators to assuage fears?
3. How does competency-based undergraduate education effect graduate programs?

Implications

Reshaping the current system of higher education will not be without obstacles. This process is likely to occur over the next several years and some institutions will be more receptive than others; therefore, this research has the potential to inform the crusaders about the barriers they can expect and will prepare late adopters for what may be coming.

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