In higher education, it sometimes feels like what goes around comes around. That’s the case to some extent around competency-based education (CBE). A presence on the edges of higher education for decades, CBE is once again gaining traction. Is this a concept whose time has finally come?

From Arizona to Maine, and from Wisconsin to Texas—and across all of cyberspace—a handful of innovative AASCU institutions are staking new claims in competency-based education. True to their pioneering spirit, each institution is creating its own unique form of CBE.

**Seat Time or Mastery?**

Competency-based education, of course, is based on the notion of measuring learning not by hours spent in a classroom or number of courses taken, but by having students prove they have mastered certain knowledge and skills. A confluence of factors drive interest in CBE today, including the aspiration of helping adult students complete college, perhaps at less cost to both students and institutions. Many employers clamor for a workforce better trained in basic skills that can be delivered effectively via CBE. Educational technology makes online CBE viable. For stakeholders interested in seeing higher education demonstrate more accountability, CBE provides demonstrable markers of student learning outcomes.

Foundations have funded significant research and development in CBE. The Lumina Foundation, for example, funded the Competency-Based Education Network (C-BEN), a consortium of colleges and universities that share ideas for developing and scaling competency-based programs. (Several AASCU institutions discussed in this article are...
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members.) The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation also supports CBE.

This past summer, the Obama administration announced support for a new round of “experimental sites,” where selected institutions are given flexibility for disbursing student aid for CBE-style coursework. A bipartisan Congressional bill that would fund CBE demonstration projects passed the House this summer and awaits action by the Senate.

Distinctive Approaches

Several AASCU universities are advancing models of CBE styled for four-year public institutions.

Concerns about barriers to learning, including a pace of teaching that does not reflect individual learning styles, helped form the philosophy that drives a new CBE initiative at Northern Arizona University (NAU). Branded as “Personalized Learning,” the program offers a self-paced, online, competency-based pathway to a bachelor’s degree. Current offerings include business administration, computer information technology, and liberal arts. Enrollees pay a flat, six-month subscription rate of $2,500, including all course materials. Students can transfer credit from other colleges, including prior learning documented with evaluations like ACE credits. Work experiences may help students pass pretests and advance through the program more quickly.

“We see this program as primarily for adult students who have work and life experience, and who want to move through as quickly as they can,” says Fred Hurst, the university’s senior vice president for extended campuses. This fall, some 350 students were enrolled, and the program was adding as many as 35 students per week. NAU has invested upwards of $4 million to start the program, with much of that sum going toward curriculum development.

Hurst says the program works hard to help students concentrate on learning and be challenged but not fail. “We’ve said from the beginning that we wanted to bring the joy back to learning,” he says. “To us, the joy of learning is being able to go at your own pace and to know that you will be successful if you spend the time to master the information.”

The University of Maryland University College (UMUC), meanwhile, takes a different tack. “We are moving toward competency-based education, but for us it is a methodology. We don’t see it as a separate track,” says Marie Cini, provost and senior vice president for academic affairs. CBE at UMUC, now in a testing phase, creates “an opportunity to design our courses even more effectively so that students learn the material better,” Cini says. She adds that she thinks CBE “forces an institution to look once again at how students learn and how we help them learn.”

Students at UMUC will take initial assessments, but will learn how to master material within courses that will be redesigned, with a competency-based emphasis, to present the right level of material at the right stage for optimum learning. Careful course sequencing will enable UMUC’s more than 90,000 students, most of whom study online, to build on existing competencies to attain full mastery and integrate experience and learning.

UMUC’s new approach will not necessarily make the student experience quicker, cheaper or faster. Rather, the key goal is that a competency-based methodology will help make sure that students have “enough time and the right kind of support and learning experiences to ensure that they are actually mastering the material,” Cini says. “We put a lot of emphasis on application, and competency-based is forcing us to do that even better.”

Cini knows that some critics will say CBE just teaches vocational skills, but she says it goes far beyond that: “We’re looking at the higher levels of Bloom’s taxonomy. Students need to be able to synthesize and analyze. They need a certain level of knowledge in order to do that in a real world setting.”

Yet another approach can be found at the University of Maine at Presque Isle (UMPI). State legislators have mandated that all Maine high schools graduate students based on a proficiency-based curriculum by 2018. UMPI announced early in 2014 that it, too, would transition to proficiency-based education. Focused on real-world problems and offering hands-on experience, proficiency-based learning at UMPI includes elements of CBE, such as requiring students to achieve targeted competencies in such skills as collaboration, creativity and critical thinking.

One critical difference, though, is that UMPI is working not with adult students, the typical audience for CBE, but with traditionally-aged students, including first semester freshmen. The university began offering its proficiency-based learning approach to incoming freshmen this fall.
Testing the proficiency-based model in select courses gives UMPI the opportunity to compare student experiences using that approach with students in similar courses being delivered more conventionally.

In a statement earlier this year, UMPI President Linda Schott said, “We believe that students should own their learning, receive an education personalized to their needs, focus on building competencies instead of accumulating seat-time, and get thorough career preparation at all stages of their time in college. That is what proficiency-based education as delivered by UMPI looks like.”

“We are doing this because we know that learners learn in different ways,” Schott says, “and you don’t need one system where everything is the same. You need a range of universities providing a range of learning opportunities.”

Another pioneering effort is a collaboration between the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, South Texas College (STC) and Texas A&M University-Commerce (TAMUC) to offer the state’s first competency-based baccalaureate degree. Launched this past January, the degree was born from brainstorming in response to Governor Rick Perry’s call for a $10,000 undergraduate degree.

STC and TAMUC collaborated to develop the curriculum, but offer separate degrees. The modular-format program is entirely online at TAMUC, but is offered face-to-face at STC, with plans to migrate it online. At TAMUC, students enroll in six seven-week terms that cost $750 each, including textbooks. Students can accelerate their progress based on motivation and desire.

“We have many first-generation and underprepared students with family and professional obligations that get in the way of completing a degree,” says Mary Hendrix, vice president for student access and success at TAMUC. “I think this program will provide many of them with options that they have never had before.” Enrollment in the new program has been doubling each term, even before a full-fledged marketing campaign begins. “I can give you story after story of individuals for whom this is making such a big difference in their lives,” Hendrix says.

The University of Wisconsin System campuses and UW-Extension have partnered to offer yet another variation on CBE. The “UW Flexible Option,” as it has been dubbed, offers self-paced, competency-based degree and certificate programs primarily targeted to adults and other nontraditional students. Current offerings include bachelor’s degrees in nursing, diagnostic imaging, information science, and business communications. Students can demonstrate their progress through prior coursework, military training, on-the-job training, and other learning experiences, as well as through assessments. So far, demand for the flexible option is outstripping capacity.

“We need to expand models of higher education, particularly delivering quality education to the wide range of students who enroll today,” says Aaron Brower, interim chancellor of UW Colleges. Brower is quick to counsel other institutions that might want to pursue a similar path to proceed with caution. “This is a big investment of time, energy, people and money.” At the same time, though, he also says those investments are worth it. “CBE is needed in our portfolio of educational models,” he says.

One grandparent of CBE is, of course, Western Governor’s University (Utah), which since its creation in 1996 has delivered competency-based education exclusively (note, WGU is not an AASCU institution).

Having reflected on CBE and WGU’s experiences at length, Sally M. Johnstone, vice president for academic advancement at WGU, takes a big-picture view. Observing that colleges and universities are not fully meeting expectations for student success, at the same time that institutions seek less expensive ways to deliver education, Johnstone suggests that higher education needs to think in new ways.

Learning science shows us that students learn in different ways and at different paces, she says. “When you recognize that, you can begin to develop very different kinds of models” for education—different in terms of how we expect students to behave, what faculty do, and what kinds of learning resources are used—“and very importantly for our current public policy environment, you can actually demonstrate what students know when they master a subject.”
Challenges of CBE

Starting a CBE program comes with many innate and substantial challenges. Will the curriculum be structured around modules, courses, faculty-curated materials—or in some other way? How will students be tested? Are types of testing for lower levels of material, such as multiple choice questions, adequate to measure more complex higher-level learning? How will credit be awarded? How will credit be counted—and what student accomplishments constitute a degree?

CBE also calls for new institutional and federal financial aid policies. The Department of Education has started to approve financial aid for competency-based education. CBE also means rethinking accreditation. Appropriate changes have started to manifest themselves at accrediting agencies.

CBE changes the faculty dynamic in potentially dramatic ways. At UMUC, CBE means that faculty will be "more engaged in very specific learning activities with students, including more mentoring and more coaching at points where the student might be confused," Cini says. NAU’s CBE program draws on two categories of professors—faculty mentors who act as coaches to help students map learning goals and career paths, and subject-matter experts who are available for consults and to track student progress. Johnstone says that faculty at WGU, where students progress through material that professors curate, act more like tutors than instructors.

While UMPI successfully engaged most of its faculty in CBE, professors at other institutions proved more resistant to change. NAU asked its existing faculty to help design the "Personalized Learning" curriculum, but decided to hire new faculty for its CBE program.

UMUC believes that CBE opens doors for faculty to think about their roles in new ways. "Our faculty often say they don't have enough opportunities, day to day, to really think about their content, their curriculum and how students learn," Cini says. "This initiative is forcing us to do that."

Yet another challenge is making systems for things like registration, grading and financial aid, which were designed for traditional education, work for CBE. "None of the structures and systems in traditional colleges and universities are designed to handle" CBE, Johnstone says. UMPI, for example, runs parallel systems—one for CBE alongside a more traditional system—and is avidly working to make back office functions work for CBE. Dealing with similar challenges at TAMUC, Hendrix says, "We need vendors to step up to the plate with products that will bridge the gap between existing systems and what needs to be done to [accommodate CBE]."

Clearly, CBE is gaining traction. In addition to the schools in C-BEN, 20 more are developing CBE through an initiative at the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL). By some estimates, 350 institutions are engaged in some form of competency-based education. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan declared his intentions about CBE when he told an audience at WGU that, "While such programs are now the exception, I want them to be the norm." In the for-profit sector, several major entities—including Capella and Kaplan Higher Education—have moved aggressively to compete effectively for the adult student market using CBE.

Competency-based education is "moving at a pace that's stunning," Johnstone says. In that context, the AASCU institutions that have recently started CBE programs are truly at the vanguard of a movement in higher education whose time may have finally come.

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How might a student’s prior learning help meet program requirements? How will tuition be structured, and what levels are appropriate? For most of these questions, the institutions mentioned above all take different approaches.

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