



A Leader's Guide to Competency-Based Education: From Inception to Implementation

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Book Review

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Recognizing the growing interest in competency-based education (CBE) in U.S. higher education, but also the lack of shared standards or practices around it, three experts produced this guide for other educators who are contemplating a move to (or revision of) this type of instructional program. The authors help those who are enthusiastic about CBE avoid pitfalls by offering practical guidance. They strike a cautionary tone throughout, beginning their Introduction with the sobering reality that “there are relatively few schools that have been able to move from interest to implementation” (1).

One of the reasons for caution may be that even a definition of CBE is hard to come by. The authors joke that “if you were to ask ten people to define CBE, you would likely hear ten different answers” (2). Instead they offer five “hallmarks” of CBE: (1) “time is variable, and learning is fixed”; (2) there is “required demonstration of mastery or proficiency” which is (3) “determined by rigorous assessments”; CBE is (4) “focused on the student learning journey” and is (5) “offered in a flexible, self-paced approach” (3-4). Many educational programs would claim one or more of these hallmarks, but taken together, they represent a distinct departure from traditional education. CBE’s most famous feature may be the way it changes the relationship between learning and time by replacing the credit hour with continuous direct assessment. As the authors demonstrate, however, this change complicates everything from the transcript to faculty workload to accreditation. CBE’s intense focus on individualized student learning paths and assessment (“assessment on steroids,” as I once heard) is also significant because it changes what learners actually do to learn and what teachers do to teach. Traditional faculty roles are likely to be unbundled, “reassembled” (89), and redefined –

or replaced – by roles like coach, tutor, and psychometrician.

Given the challenge of defining CBE and the guide's relative brevity, it would benefit from some case studies, at least for readers who are still trying to gain a clear picture of *what* a CBE program looks like and *why* an institution might adopt one in the first place. Cases would presumably also help CBE adopters appreciate why other institutions made the choices they did. The book reads instead like an insider's guide.

The book's best feature, accordingly, is its soup-to-nuts review of issues that educators must consider when designing competency-based education. Chapters address institutional culture, program design, assessment strategies, staffing and business models, and approval seeking. Readers come away fully aware that CBE is not just a different teaching approach but a potentially radical disruption to education delivery.

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