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A New Teaching Structure Could Make College More Affordable. Why Don't More Schools Adopt It?

By [Cory Weinberg](#) June 19, 2014

Around a year ago, instructors at community colleges in Washington State began to notice big discrepancies in their business majors' academic aptitude. Many lumbered through math courses and needed extra time to catch up. Others had to sit through required computer classes despite having plenty of on-the-job training. Administrators needed a way to keep some students from falling behind and others from wasting their time. They devised an experimental curriculum that the college system's [governing body](#) is expected to approve later this week.

Starting in January 2015, about a dozen community colleges in the state will pilot a new type of online business administration program. The degree is designed so that students can take as long as they want to learn a subject. Once they feel ready, they take a test to prove they've mastered the unit and can move on to the next one. But students who already know the material can skip to the test without doing any coursework, saving them time and money. The Washington schools are the latest to adopt competency-based learning, a model that measures students on mastery of subjects instead of time spent in a classroom (or in front of a computer).

By slicing a semester off their degree, students in the pilot program could save more than \$2,000. The potential to save is one of the reasons the White House [backed](#) competency-based models last year as a way to make college more affordable. Students also get a secondary financial benefit: A fast-tracked degree propels them into the workplace—and puts them on track for bigger paychecks—sooner.

In March, the U.S. Department of Education made it easier for competency-based colleges [to become eligible to offer federal student aid](#). But while the instruction style may be gaining support, examples such as the Washington one are rare.

“We’re taking a chance,” says Connie Broughton, project director for competency-based education at the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges. “But we know we have a lot of different kinds of learners, and we think this program will be a way for some of those learners to be successful more efficiently than the traditional way.”

The idea has taken root at the graduate level. The competency-based online MBA program at [Western Governors University](#), a private nonprofit college initially backed in 1997 by 19 U.S. governors, has grown 20 percent to almost 4,000 students in the past year, says Eric Goodman, national director of the university's college of business.

Goodman says student demand is up for WGU's business school and its \$6,000-per-year MBA program because of its self-paced approach and return on investment. The university [reports](#) that its graduates see an \$18,600 salary increase four to six years after graduation.

Competency-based programs can also boost a school's bottom line. They tend to work best in an online format, and since eliminating classrooms reduces overhead, schools can reap higher profits, says Brian Levin-Stankevich, president of Westminster College in Salt Lake City. The school's competency-based bachelor of business administration and MBA return about 50 percent more than the school invests in the programs, he says.

Elements of the competency-based model even appeal to some elite schools. Two years ago, the University of Pennsylvania's [Wharton School](#) started to let students [opt out](#) of core requirements if they demonstrated mastery in a topic. "You might be someone doing marketing at Disney, sitting next to someone in the same classroom with six years as an investment banker. If you're both sitting in the same corporate finance class, there's a mismatch," says Don Huesman, managing director of the Innovation Group at Wharton.

Testing out of core courses can put students on a fast track to in-depth electives. As a result, student satisfaction is up, says Huesman. Students still take two years to earn an MBA, however, so Wharton's model doesn't tackle the affordability issue—a key sticking point for many who push competency-based education.

If competency-based programs are cheaper to complete, offer better margins for schools, and help students wring more benefit from their education, why aren't they everywhere? For a start, implementation isn't easy. When business faculty at Westminster College adopted a competency-based model in 2007, they had to rethink not only how students earned credits, but also how the administration evaluated teachers and the way faculty developed curriculum, says Levin-Stankevich. "It upsets the entire structure of our labor pool, in that we tend to measure everything in credit hours delivered," he says. "The faculty time in developing these programs is also the challenge."

The model also works better for classes and programs that teach technical skills, like nursing or accounting, than softer subjects such as marketing or leadership, says Jeffrey Selingo, author of *College (Un)Bound: The Future of Higher Education and What It Means for Students* and a proponent of competency-based learning.

But while measuring competency makes education more valuable and efficient, schools remain skeptical, Selingo says. The model can upend teaching schedules because students weave unpredictably through programs; and despite the low overhead, it could hurt revenue streams if it allows students to get on a fast track. He says employers may also be skeptical of competency-based credentials, making schools reluctant to adopt changes.

"It's not a one-size-fits-all system, and that's a problem for schools," Selingo says.

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