

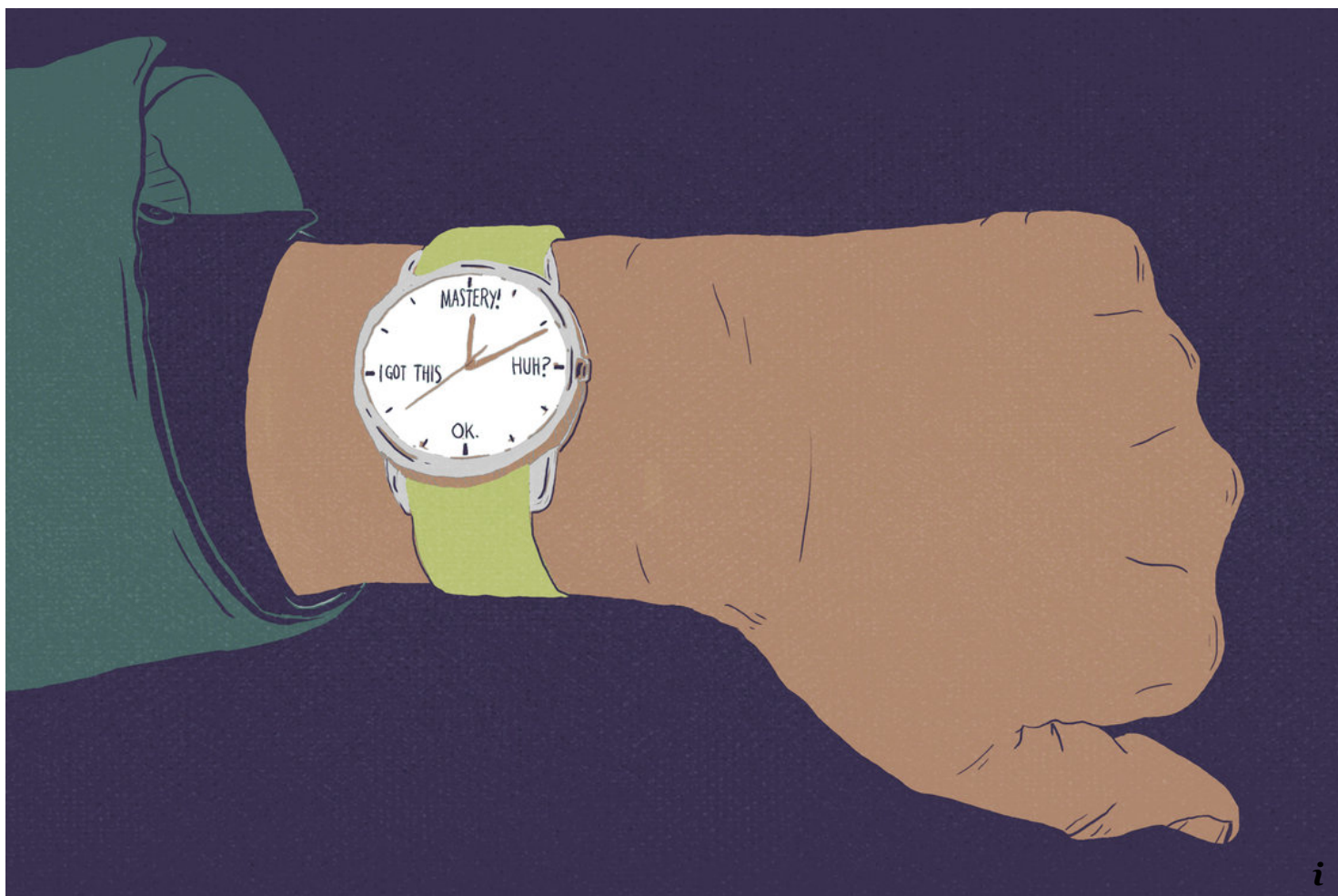


k-12 higher ed learning & tech

Competency-Based Education: No More Semesters?

by ANYA KAMENETZ

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LA Johnson/NPR

"I went to a four-year university." "That job requires a one-year certificate." "It's a two-semester course." "She's a fifth-year senior." What do these expressions have in common? They use time as the yardstick for higher education.

Essentially, this means measuring not how much you've learned, but how long you've spent

trying to learn it.

The conventions of the credit hour, the semester and the academic year were formalized in the early 1900s. Time forms the template for designing college programs, accrediting them and — crucially — funding them using federal student aid.

But in 2013, for the first time, the Department of Education took steps to loosen the rules.

The new idea: Allow institutions to get student-aid funding by creating programs that directly measure learning, not time. Students can move at their own pace. The school certifies — measures — what they know and are able to do.

It's known as "direct assessment" or "competency-based education."

In July of this year, the Department of Education announced a new round of "experimental sites" that will be allowed to try out such programs without losing financial-aid eligibility.

"There are big changes going on out in the field of education," says David Soo, a senior policy adviser at the Department of Education. "And we want to encourage them to happen."

According to Inside Higher Ed, more than 350 institutions now offer or are seeking to create competency-based degrees. So it's a safe bet that we'll be hearing more about this trend soon. Here's why you might want to pay attention.

The Target Student Has A "Full-Time Life"

The largest pool of current and potential college students in the United States is not 18- to 22-year-olds. That demographic is actually shrinking.

Instead, there are tens of millions of adults in their early 20s through late middle age who need to complete their first degree, earn a second or simply update their skills. Educators say that's exactly whom these competency-based programs will serve best.

The "Flexible Option" at the University of Wisconsin currently offers five competency-based degrees. It's the first public institution to receive permission to offer this kind of program.

"Our target is students who have what we call a 'full-time life,' " says Aaron Brower, who oversees

the program. Average age: 37. "This is an opportunity to fit education around their life rather than ask them to fit their life around a standard academic calendar."

For Carla Lundeen of LaCrosse, Wis., that change can't come soon enough. She's a 44-year-old working mom and stepmom of four kids who's getting her bachelor's degree in nursing.

The new programs mean getting out her laptop to study after dinner on weeknights, and taking exams or writing papers on weekends. She doesn't have to carry a full- or half-time course load but can spread the work out as needed. "For people who are working right now," she says, "I think it's a great option because you can tailor it to your life."

More Than Just Online

Online colleges have been advertising self-paced programs for over a decade. Credit by exam, such as the AP exam, and independent-study credits have been around even longer.

So what makes competency-based education different?

For one thing, it can allow students to receive college credit for knowledge they acquired elsewhere. Since Flex students at Wisconsin are older, most have prior college and work experience.

Lundeen, a licensed nurse, is already working in the health care field as a quality manager at a long-term-care support agency.

"A lot of what I learned on the job I can use to complete those competencies," she says. "I don't necessarily have to sit down and read in a textbook."

That means when she comes across a written assignment on community health, say, she can use examples from her own experience. "They don't ask you where or how you got the information as long as you can prove it."

Assessments Are Crucial

"Proving it," of course, is the rub.

In a traditional college degree program, assessments and course requirements are typically

decided by individual professors or within a department. Which can lead to wide variations in expectations, workload and grading.

Back in college, you may have sweated your way through 12-hour physics problem sets while your roommate crafted art installations out of dryer lint (that was my roommate, actually).

But if you stuck with it at least eight semesters, both of you earned degrees that were, in many ways, equivalent; a "bachelor's."

Freed of the credit-hour constraint, competency-based programs need to be a lot more rigorous and transparent about designing assessments. Otherwise, they risk turning into diploma mills.

In fact, last month the Education Department's Office of the Inspector General warned in an audit that the department was not working hard enough to ensure that the new programs included "regular and substantive" contact with professors and were not merely "correspondence programs."

In response to the report, the Education Department says it's taking steps to improve oversight.

Excelsior College in upstate New York, founded in 1971, is one of the oldest distance-learning institutions in the country. And since then it has been doing a version of competency-based education for working adults, although it is technically mapped to the semester system since, until recently, no other options existed.

"Both my personal and the college's belief is that you cannot determine whether someone is competent unless you can determine their ability to demonstrate whatever knowledge they have in as real a situation as you can," says Excelsior President John Ebersole.

He cites the school's program in nursing as an example. Students complete the majority of their studies online. Then they go into a real hospital setting, under the supervision of a trained nurse educator.

There, over the course of 2 1/2 days, they care for real patients: reading charts, developing a care plan, carrying out physicians' instructions, administering medications and demonstrating bedside manner.

"When someone passes that competency assessment, we know what their capabilities are and

what they can do," says Ebersole.

Learning That Translates To The Real World

The Lumina Foundation has been one of the most influential nonprofit groups pushing the idea of competency-based education. Its president, Jamie Merisotis, says the idea has implications far beyond students like Carla Lundeen.

"Our inability to articulate what degrees mean and what they represent is coming at an increasing price," Merisotis says, citing the rising debate about affordability and student debt. "The market is responding unfavorably."

Merisotis believes the answer is to better define all college degrees in terms of the acquisition of specialized knowledge and higher-order skills — in other words, "competencies."

Lumina is about to release the final version of a document called the "Degree Qualifications Profile." It aims to provide a common basis for understanding the competencies required for an associate's, bachelor's or master's degree in any field.

In its draft form, around 400 institutions from small liberal arts colleges to large community colleges have begun to use the document in their strategic planning.

Excelsior College's Ebersole agrees that the idea of competency-based degrees is bigger than adult education alone. But his vision is a little different from Merisotis'.

He says employer input in a given field is crucial in seeing whether these degrees will hold water. "Ultimately it's the employer who is going to be the judge of whether we've done a good job."

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