

Competency-based education continues spread | Inside Higher Ed

The credit hour is still higher education's gold standard, even after President Obama's vague endorsement last month of competency-based education and its focus on "performance and results" rather than seat time.

It's unclear whether Obama's [call](#) could help open the door for [competency-based approaches](#) by spurring changes to the current system of accreditation or the rules governing federal financial aid. Even so, colleges aren't waiting on the feds.

Several institutions have continued to expand competency-based offerings aimed at working adults. And while all but one are still grounded in the [credit hour](#), these online degree programs are typically self-paced and emphasize the testing of competency, sometimes even of learning that occurs outside of the traditional classroom.

A notable example is the continued growth of Western Governors University, which is launching two new state-based versions of its online, low-priced model -- in [Missouri](#) and [Tennessee](#). Governors of the two states announced the new universities last month, and both said they hope to cover some of the start-up costs with money from state coffers. The two new WGUs will join similar branches in Indiana, Texas and Washington.

Other universities are getting creative as they try to work around the credit hour. One is Bellevue University, which this month introduced an [online bachelor's degree](#) in business administration where students set their own pace. There are no predetermined dates for students to com-

plete quizzes, papers or discussion board posts during the six-month semester, with the only firm deadline being the end of the term. (Students must hold at least 60 previously earned college credits to enroll in the program.)

An instructional team of four from Bellevue – including two faculty members, a student coach and a “reader” who monitors and grades work – will help students as they work through course material, ensuring that they’re making progress. The team will track students’ performance on a daily basis, according to officials at Bellevue, and will reach out to those who fall behind.

The university, which is located in Nebraska and has a heavy focus on working adults, designed the degree program to adhere to the rules for regional accreditation and federal aid eligibility. That means sticking with the credit hour. But the new online degree track, which is dubbed Flexxive, is a somewhat novel twist on competency-based education.

“We’re trying to address the mastery of learning,” said Mary Hawkins, Bellevue’s president, “rather than just seat time.”

Students must prove that they have successfully completed required learning objectives by the end of the term. However, if they are lacking in certain areas, Hawkins said they can go back to complete that learning without having to repeat entire courses. And with a flat tuition rate of \$3,000 for 12 credits and up, the price per credit goes down if students take more courses each term. A 24-credit load would be \$125 per credit, for example; a 12-credit load would be \$250 per credit.

The degree program enrolls only a handful of students so far, and Hawkins calls it a work in progress that is likely to be tweaked.

“We’re trying to keep it controlled,” she said. But Hawkins said now is the time to experiment with customized learning, which she predicts will be a big innovation in higher education and where “online learning has its biggest strength.”

The Direct Approach

The next level for competency-based education is to forgo any requirements based on the credit hour and to instead offer credit based solely on assessed learning, with no link to time spent in class or on work for courses. That method, called direct assessment, remains largely untried. But that may be changing.

Southern New Hampshire University has begun such a program, with its new College for America. The college, which has [received approval](#) from a regional accreditor and now enrolls students, has no classes in the traditional sense. Students work through self-paced material and are [tested on their mastery](#) of 120 competencies, which are broken into individual “tasks” that are assessed by faculty reviewers.

College for America is waiting on further guidance from the U.S. Department of Education, which has been expected for a few months.

Several other colleges may follow Southern New Hampshire down the direct assessment path. One could be Brandman University, according to officials at the nonprofit institution, which split off from Chapman University a few years ago. Brandman enrolls about 6,800 students (roughly half of them undergraduates) at its 26 branch campuses in California and Oregon. The format is blended, with a mix of online courses and in-class instruction. And the university recently got a [positive review](#) from its regional accreditor.

For now, however, most colleges continue to “map” their competency-based degree requirements to the credit hour. Hawkins said that can be a labor-intensive job. “We laid out the program in big chunks of credit hours.”

Competing With Competency?

Several new competency-based programs emerged last year, including ones being developed by the University of Wisconsin System and Northern Arizona University. Also among public institutions, the University of Maryland University College has continued to ramp up its prior-learning assessment offerings, and is well-positioned to do more on the competency side.

Yet Western Governors University is still probably the most visible of players in competency-based education. And the 16-year-old university is hardly resting on its laurels. Western Governors’ national enrollment grew by more than 35 percent last year, and stands at almost 39,000. Bob Mendenhall, the university’s president, said all three of WGU’s state-based institutions topped 3,000 students in their first couple of years of existence.

The university caters to adult students, with online bachelor and master’s degree programs clustered in business, teacher education, IT and health professions. Courses are self-paced, with instructors standing by to help students along the way. And tuition is typically a flat rate of about \$3,000 per term.

Students who attend the state WGUs are eligible for those states’ financial aid programs. But the university stresses that it is not trying to compete with local universities, and is instead serving students who would

otherwise not be enrolled in college. Many are degree completers, who have attended college in the past but failed to earn a degree.

State WGUs also [offer discounts](#) to in-state community college students who transfer in after completing their associate degrees, which can help boost graduation rates at community colleges.

“There are nearly 750,000 Missourians who started college but never completed their degrees,” Gov. Jay Nixon said in a [written statement](#) announcing the creation of WGU Missouri. “Many of them may want to go back to complete their degrees, but haven't. Often, that is because they believe it is too expensive to return to college, or the demands on their time from job or family are too great.”

There are 800,000 Tennesseans in a similar position, [according](#) to Gov. Bill Haslam. Both governors have been active in setting ambitious degree completion goals for their states. They said Western Governors could play a big role, and announced the new institutions in their recent “state of the state” addresses.

Students in states where WGU runs a branch operation can also enroll in the national version, and the statewide operations will include the same degree programs and services. But they will be marketed specifically to in-state students and offer state aid.

Quiet Launch

Plans for the two new WGUs have yet to generate much criticism, although some college leaders in Tennessee were surprised and disappointed to learn that state money might help pay for WGU's startup costs, which typically include marketing and staffing. The legislature in that state will consider funding. In Missouri, Nixon said the university

would receive \$4 million from the state. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation is also kicking in money in Missouri.

The start-up funding is something of a departure for WGU, which has almost entirely relied on foundation support and its own capital to launch the three previous state versions. Neither the Texas nor Washington institutions received any state funds, according to a university spokeswoman, and WGU Indiana only received \$500,000 from the state, which was used to support rural nursing programs.

For the most part, WGU Missouri has been well-received by public college leaders in the state, said Hal L. Higdon, president of Ozarks Technical College. “We will actively engage with WGU to provide seamless transfer opportunities for our students,” Higdon said in an e-mail, “which will benefit our students and the State of Missouri.”

Western Governors doesn’t offer associate degrees, and Missouri’s community colleges charge even less than the university. But Higdon thinks WGU Missouri might draw some students away from the state’s four-year institutions, in part because nontraditional students are an increasing part of the enrollment mix in the state.

In Tennessee, public and private colleges are banding together to create a joint Web portal aimed at adult students, said Claude O. Pressnell Jr., who leads the Tennessee Independent Colleges and Universities Association. The site will be a “single-stop shop” that will explain options for nontraditional credit pathways, he said, such as through prior learning assessment.

Some college leaders in Tennessee would prefer that the startup money for WGU Tennessee stay in the state, according to Pressnell, who said

the funds could have been used as a “challenge” grant to encourage Tennessee colleges to meet more adult student demand. That said, he thinks the state’s colleges won’t grumble too much.

“It has motivated us to do a better job of making visible the work we’re doing,” said Pressnell. “We’re not afraid of competition.”

Mendenhall said state WGUs will be self-supporting once they are up and running. Missouri is farther along in its creation, he said, but both new institutions have a few months to go before they begin in earnest.

The university plans to continue its in-state expansion. Mendenhall said he expects one or two new state WGUs each year. But the university will not have 50 branches, he said, because directing students to the national version will suffice in some states, particularly small ones.

“We really do want to partner with every state,” said Mendenhall.