

Competency-based education's newest form creates promise and questions | Inside Higher Ed

Earlier this year Capella University and the new College for America began enrolling hundreds of students in academic programs without courses, teaching professors, grades, deadlines or credit hour requirements, but with a path to genuine college credit.

The two institutions are among a [growing number](#) that are giving competency-based education a try, including 25 or so nonprofit institutions. Notable examples include [Western Governors University](#) and the [Kentucky Community and Technical College System](#).

These programs are typically online, and allow students to progress at their own pace without formal course material. They can earn credit by successfully completing assessments that prove their mastery in predetermined competencies or tasks -- maybe writing in a business setting or using a spreadsheet to perform calculations.

College for America and a small pilot program at Capella go a step further than the others, however, by severing any link to the [credit hour standard](#). This approach is called "direct assessment." Other competency-based programs track learning back to [seat time](#) under the credit hour, which assumes one hour of instruction and three hours of coursework per week. (For more details from College for America, click [here](#).)

As a result, direct assessment is the most extensive form of competency-based education. And it looks nothing like traditional college classes. Perhaps the method's most revolutionary, and controversial, contribution is a changed role for faculty. Instructors don't teach, because there are no lectures or any other guided path through course material.

Competency-based education makes many academics **uncomfortable**. For example, Carol Geary Schneider, president of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, worries that the rigor reflected in a competency-based credential would suffer if those competencies are **viewed in isolation** and not linked to a coherent curriculum.

"The definition of a curriculum is that it's a course of study that's designed to produce something," she said.

Students at College for America and in the experimental Capella courses have a choice between several suggested study guides or texts that relate to assessed competencies. Much of the content both institutions point students toward is free, or open educational resources (OER).

As part of Capella's pilot, for example, the university is "agnostic" about sources of learning. Books are not required. And students can pick from a suggested hodgepodge of texts, e-books, videos, journal articles and even their experiences at work to master competencies. But that's all optional, and they can skip reading about concepts they already know or think they know.

Faculty members do, however, have interaction with students in the Capella project. Quite a bit, actually, say professors who have overseen assessments in the eight courses in the pilot program. About 120 students are enrolled in those courses, which include four undergraduate business courses and four in the master's in business administration program.

Professors led the development of the new courses at Capella. And they help shape the assignments and assessments that are the most relevant to competencies, which faculty members helped identify.

Capella may have had a head start in this work. That's because the for-profit university, which is fully online, started using competencies a decade ago. Now all its academic programs and curriculums are grounded in the competency-based approach, says Deb Bushway, Capella's vice president for academic innovation.

Bushway says the university has done the "hard work" to design cohesive curriculums that are fully expressed as competencies.

"The faculty are at the heart of making decisions about content," she says. And "every single faculty judgment can be traced to the program outcomes."

Faculty members at Capella describe extensive back-and-forth communication with students about assessments. That feedback is personalized, they say, and focuses on both broad concepts and granular details.

"This is really the next step of teaching online," says Ted Freeman, a part-time instructor in Capella's M.B.A. program. He says the direct assessment format offers more flexibility for students, but "they do the same quantity and quality of work."

No 'Passing Fad'

The U.S. Department of Education in March [gave its blessing](#) to experiments with direct assessment. College for America [earned a green light](#) from its regional accreditor last fall and [final approval](#) from the U.S. Education Department last week. That means students at the college can now receive federal financial aid.

Capella is one of four institutions that are participating in a [pilot program](#) in direct assessment that is being overseen by the Higher Learning

Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, the largest of the six regional accreditors. Joining Capella are Northern Arizona University, the University of Wisconsin Colleges, a system of two-year campuses; and the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee.

Northern Arizona is waiting on the commission's approval of its [direct assessment program](#), which is dubbed the "personalized learning initiative." It features 120-credit, competency-based bachelor's degree tracks in three majors: computer information technology, small business administration and liberal arts.

"This is a very ambitious project," says Alison Brown, associate vice president of the university's extended campuses and personalized learning division. "The material and the skills are reinforced repetitively."

Others will follow. Mike Offerman, an expert on competency-based education and a consultant for the Lumina Foundation, predicts that 10 or so institutions will soon join Capella and College for America in offering direct assessment degree tracks.

"This is not a passing fad," says Deb Adair, managing director and chief planning officer for Quality Matters, a nonprofit group that does peer reviews of online courses.

Competency-based education, like the rest of the academy, serves different types of students in different ways. And the first two direct assessment programs share few similarities. But both offer clues about the potential student market for this "disruption" to higher education.

Capella's small experimental program falls more on the boutique side. The courses are in bachelor's- and master's-degree tracks. And universi-

ty officials say they are aimed at adult students described as “education- al pioneers” who are highly motivated and self-directed. The ideal candidate is also “technologically savvy and is a bit of risk taker.”

Eligible students for the pilot must be employees of Capella's [corporate partners](#) or of the university. And they must already be enrolled in the business degree tracks with a minimum GPA of 3.0.

College for America's 275 currently enrolled students are all working toward an associate degree in general studies. They must be employees of the college's partners, which include the city of Memphis, ConAgra and Anthem Blue Cross and Blue Shield. But Paul LeBlanc, Southern New Hampshire's president, says the college might consider opening its digital doors to a broader range of students.

Unlike Capella, however, College for America is geared to some of the nation's least-well-served student populations. LeBlanc describes this group as “frontline, hourly workers” at call centers, food processing plants and retailers. For many of them, the alternative choice of a college is nothing at all, he says.

One big draw could be the college's tuition. It's \$2,500 a year with suggested open-source course material. So, since the program is self-paced, that could be \$5,000 for an associate degree that takes two years to complete. The price could go down, or up, depending on how quickly a student successfully completes assessments.

So how big is College for America's target enrollment?

LeBlanc says the college's goal is to reach 350,000 students by 2018. It might not get there, he says, but the plan is to make a serious impact on the training of America's work force.

“We have from the beginning imagined opening it up to the general population,” says LeBlanc. “Given interest in it, we’re considering doing that earlier than later.”

Working Adults

Cathy Steele is one of Capella’s educational pioneers.

She is an assistant to a senior vice president at Williams-Sonoma, the housewares company. Steele has worked in similar jobs for more than 20 years. She does not hold a bachelor’s degree. Steele first enrolled in Capella’s online bachelor’s degree track in business administration in 2009.

“It was when my youngest son was in his last semester of college,” says Steele, a resident of San Rafael, Calif. “I decided to go back myself.”

She was attracted to the program’s flexibility, and says she heard about Capella from a friend at her church.

After a while Steele wondered if she was missing something by not having the in-class experience of hybrid courses, which include both online and in-person elements. So she applied to several private nonprofit colleges.

She was admitted to three colleges, but eventually decided to skip the classroom environment, which she says “felt forced” for a veteran of the work place and a “full-time student with full-time work.”

The application process, however, proved worthwhile in a one key way: Steele was told that all of her Capella credits would transfer to each college if she enrolled there.

She stuck with Capella, and later jumped at the chance to try direct assessment.

The university is using its quarter system for courses in the experimental program. Students can take a maximum of two courses at any one time. The courses include a minimum of four assessments, with an additional, final assessment at the end. Some have as many as 10.

Tuition is set by the quarter, at \$2,000 for undergraduates and \$2,200 for MBA students.

So far Capella has not received approval from its accreditor or the Education Department for issuing credit without applying seat time from the credit hour standard. So the pilot program features behind-the-scenes credit conversion, through which students can earn credit for their degree tracks and if they transfer to another institution.

“We’re retrofitting this new model into the old way of doing things,” Bushway says.

Distinguished Performance

Students aren’t graded when they complete the courses at either the Capella program or College for America. Instead, they receive four possible final descriptions of their performance: distinguished, proficient, basic and nonperformance. They can also resubmit assessments.

For example, in the course “foundations for educational leadership and management II,” Capella maps out eight competencies. One is to lead and manage an institution’s operations and resources. The assignments that match up with that competency include a “detailed framing and diagnosis” of a problem described in the assignment. To succeed on the

assignment, students must identify "leadership and managerial" challenges, specific to the context of the organization in the sample.

Assignments are not multiple-choice tests, university officials say, but assessments designed to show that students can complete projects they would be doing in the workplace.

Students must demonstrate mastery in all of the competencies in a course to get credit. For undergraduates, that means at least achieving the basic level. But for graduate students, it's distinguished or bust: they must reach that level in each competency to move on.

The expected average time for a student to complete the self-paced courses is 10 weeks, university officials say. But when they began the program in January, some students finished much faster. The first batch also finished with top marks, causing some university officials and faculty members to worry that the assessments might not be tough enough.

But it turned out that those students were among the program's high fliers. Other students had more normal, expected performance patterns on the assessments. Overall, 95 percent have completed courses in the sample, which skews toward particularly strong students.

Last quarter Steele successfully completed an upper-division sales and marketing course in the program. It took her five weeks. Like the rest of her peers, she regularly interacts with both faculty members and an academic adviser, who told her that the five-week pace was plenty aggressive.

Steele plans to take two of the direct assessment courses back to back this quarter: one in change management and another in ethics and en-

terprise. She's shooting for five weeks in each.

So far, she likes the new format. She says her adviser is "very responsive." The recommended course material she's used, typically free texts, has been high-quality. And Steele has discussed reading material with her colleagues at her job, a practice she finds valuable and relevant to assessments.

Steele's instructors have given useful and detailed responses to her work. For example, she recently submitted a 10-page paper and got back two pages of notes from the faculty member.

Capella requires instructors to respond to students within 48 hours after an assessment is submitted. That's not as intimidating as it sounds, says Rod Hagedorn, a part-time instructor in the university's business program.

Class sizes are small in the program, often around 15 students per instructor, which is less than Capella's already-small overall ratio of roughly 24 to 1. And the asynchronous nature of the direct assessment courses helps with faculty workloads. That's because assignments are spaced out based on students' varying paces, and don't bunch up like they do in typical courses.

Hagedorn says the flexibility has allowed him to spend more time scrutinizing students' work in the direct assessment program than in traditional online classes. He likes to spend hours at a coffee shop sending responses to students on his tablet. "I can focus on quality," he says.

Going Big?

Capella's high-touch approach is labor-intensive for both students and

professors. And the small class sizes might not “scale up,” to use the parlance of the day. That suggests this possible disruption might not exactly take over the world.

Yet there are other models -- College for America for one.

The associate degree program includes 120 competencies, which in turn are organized into 20 “task families” and around about 10 competency clusters. It draws heavily from the [Lumina Foundation’s Degree Qualifications Profile](#). That influential project attempts to describe what, exactly, various degrees should mean about what students know and what they can do with that knowledge.

One of the most expensive parts of the program, from the institutional perspective, is the creation and maintenance of assessments, LeBlanc says. Not all of those assessments are automated, which he calls a point of pride. To help oversee their creation, College for America hired Kate Kazin, a senior assessment expert from the Educational Testing Service. She is now the college’s chief academic officer.

The other substantial cost-incurring part of the model is on the faculty side. The college employs part-time evaluators who review assessments and double as student advisers. Student coaches, however, stay with students throughout their experience. LeBlanc says College for America’s goal will be 100 students per coach. The industry standard online, he says, is about 300 to 1.

He is confident that the college can grow without getting more costly to run. Technology shouldn’t be a problem. Currently, direct tech costs are only \$9 per student.

Whether College for America or other newcomers can offer largely au-

tomated assessments to students without raising alarms about academic rigor is where competency-based education gets tricky. It's also the question upon which rests much of competency-based education's potential – namely whether it can be a path for large numbers of students to earn degrees relatively quickly and affordably.

For their part, officials from Capella and College for America say they are still in the experimental phase.

“This as a movement is very early,” LeBlanc says. “We still don't have agreed-upon standards of best practices.”

Several observers say the new forms of competency-based education will improve over time, as more lessons are learned.

“It's going to become more scalable,” says Iris Palmer, a senior associate for HCM Strategists, a public policy firm. “And it's going to become more flexible and better for students.”

Many academics, however, will remain opposed to the hands-off form of student instruction. College credit without faculty-led courses is not higher education, some say. And the rise of competence as a standard for learning is also controversial, and threatening.

However, some observers say the discussion about how competency applies to student learning can be helpful for all of higher education.

“Aren't there competencies associated with being an effective doctor, lawyer, journalist or citizen? Ones that are best evaluated by examining work products, rather than by exam?” Adair says in an e-mail. “Isn't this just about being more specific about what we expect the student to learn and about being more accountable to ensure they have learned

it?"