



## Competency-Based Education

### The Basics

Competency-based education refers to the ability of students in K-12 or postsecondary education to earn credit toward graduation through means other than seat time-based (Carnegie Unit) classroom instruction. In this type of system, students are awarded credit only when they demonstrate that they have mastered a set of skills and content knowledge. In addition to rethinking traditional teaching and assessment approaches to emphasize mastery, competency-based education systems also provide flexible options for a range of students to achieve credit. Those include testing out of traditional on-site courses, online coursework, internships and paid employment, portfolios, and prior learning assessments (PLAs).

These options offer the potential to serve several areas that are overlooked or underserved by traditional seat time-based practices such as students at risk of dropping out or aging out of the K-12 system, home- or hospital-bound students, students in need of credit recovery due to course failure, students enrolled where there is an insufficient supply or distribution of teachers and courses, high mobility students, adults in the workplace, students with a significant amount of experience or credit and no degree, and accelerated students. Competency-based education systems also serve all students by requiring them to perform to the level necessary to be prepared for college- and career-training readiness, as laid out in the Common Core State Standards, before moving on to another grade or set of coursework.

At the K-12 level, many states have already established a policy framework for competency-based education by abolishing the use of the Carnegie Unit or providing waivers to districts that want to base advancement on mastery. Similarly, many institutions of higher education have promoted the use of online or flexible degree options. However, to bring about broad and lasting change, states will need to make changes to their finance, assessment, and accountability systems. Additionally, state policymakers must focus on scaling systems from the school/district and institution levels to the state level, and addressing the transition points between high school and postsecondary and postsecondary and workforce.

### Emerging Trends and Issues

#### K-12

- 40 states have policies that provide school districts and schools with some flexibility for awarding credit to students based on mastery of content and skills as opposed to seat time (Carnegie Unit).
  - Maine: In 2012, Maine passed a law enabling proficiency-based diplomas and requiring students to demonstrate proficiency in English, math, science, social studies and health/physical education to graduate.
  - New Hampshire: Eliminated seat time requirements in 2005 and redefined the Carnegie Unit as sets of competencies. All schools were given until the 2008-2009 school year to award academic credits based on mastery. The state's ESEA flexibility request, approved in 2013, was entirely aligned with competency-based education.
  - Oregon: In 2004, the state allowed districts and schools to pilot competency-based approaches to award credit to students. In 2009 state policy changed to mandate that all in-class work be tied to the demonstration of proficiency or mastery of academic standards. A 2012 bill, to be implemented by 2014, requires all assessments to show whether students meet content standards and to demonstrate student progress towards becoming proficient.

- Ohio: Implemented the Credit Flex policy in 2009, which requires districts and schools to provide multiple pathways for earning high school credit.

#### Postsecondary

- For the first time, the federal Department of Education has approved two competency based programs—College for America and Capella—to receive federal student aid through direct assessment of learning rather than seat time.
- In response to challenges from governors across the country, Excelsior College and other colleges in Texas and Florida have created competency based \$10,000 bachelor degree programs.
- Massive Open Online Courses, free online courses from the top universities, are expanding at a stunning rate. Coursera alone has 70,000 new students a week signing up for over 200 courses. These courses can help students gain competency at a fraction of the cost of traditional education.
- Western Governors University (WGU) is recognized as a leader in competency-based education at the postsecondary level. WGU formed partnerships with five states—Indiana, Missouri, Tennessee, Texas and Washington—to streamline credit transfer between public institutions and WGU, and provide WGU students access to state student aid.
- The University of Wisconsin (UW) recently took an important step towards competency-based education at the postsecondary level by introducing plans for the UW Flexible degree. That degree will be the first self-paced, competency-based, online degree program from a four-year public university system. The Kentucky Community and Technical College System also has a competency-based degree program called Learn on Demand.
- Prior Learning Assessments (PLAs) also offer a method for awarding college credit for college-level learning from work and life experience. The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) has found that adult students who earn PLA credits are two and a half times more likely to persist to graduation.

#### **Questions to Inspire Next Steps**

- To what extent is competency-based education/credit flexibility on the radar screen in your state? If competency-based education is currently an option in your state, how widespread is it (i.e., number of districts/schools, institutions of higher education, and students participating)?
- What current statutes or regulations encourage or discourage expansion of competency-based education at the K-12 and postsecondary levels?
- What financial barriers do you foresee in implementing competency-based education at both the K-12 and postsecondary levels?
- How is your state using or developing competency-based assessments? How is your state ensuring quality?
- How is your state thinking about educator evaluation and accountability in relation to competency-based education?
- Do the postsecondary institutions in your state award credit for prior learning? If so, which ones? On what scale?

#### **NGA Resources**

For more information on how governors can lead efforts to foster alternative methods of awarding credit, see the NGA report, [State Strategies for Awarding Credit to Support Student Learning](#). To examine your state's policy environment and design long-term strategies to create competency-based pathways for students, use the NGA [Policy Audit Tool](#).

#### **NGA Staff to Contact Regarding Competency-Based Education**

Kate Nielson, [knielson@nga.org](mailto:knielson@nga.org), 202.624.5319 (K-12)

Iris Palmer, [ipalmer@nga.org](mailto:ipalmer@nga.org), 202.624.5312 (postsecondary)