

## INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

## New Assessment Offers Accountability, Says President of Western Governors U.

BY DAN CARNEVALE

**I**NSTEAD OF HANDING out degrees based on grades or on how much time a student sits in a classroom, why not focus evaluation on what he or she actually learned? That's the idea behind competency-based assessment, which ignores seat time in favor of judging a student's knowledge and understanding of certain areas. Western Governors University, a nonprofit, online institution, has made that concept its model, and other institutions are looking into the idea.

Robert W. Mendenhall, president of Western Governors, recently answered questions from *Chronicle* readers about the idea of awarding degrees by gauging competency during a live online discussion. The exchange is part of a new series of talks with newsmakers, called the Brown Bag, held each Thursday at noon, U.S. Eastern time.

**Q. I'm used to hearing "competency assessments" in terms of vocational education. How does that concept translate to a more academic setting?**

**A.** Competency assessments can be used wherever competencies can be defined. We spent, and spend, substantial effort on defining competencies for general education. It is somewhat easier for majors in business, IT, and teacher education. In our case, we form for each degree area a program council of outside experts from the profession as well as academia to define the competencies they would expect of a college graduate in that field. We have a national assessment council of outside experts that works with us to define the assessments—a combination of objective tests, performance tasks, portfolios, projects, etc.—to measure these competencies.

**Q. How do you see a competency-based education model achieving the federal**

**goals of greater public accountability in higher education?**

**A.** Actually, competency-based education is designed precisely to meet the demand for greater accountability from higher education. It requires that we define up front the competencies required to graduate, and to measure those competencies directly through assessment (rather than indirectly through credit hours and grades). Thus we guarantee exactly what our graduates will all know and be able to do.

**Q. What training do you have in place to assist faculty members in thinking in terms of competency-based assessments rather than traditional testing?**

**A.** Our model is quite different. Our faculty do not develop or teach courses—we utilize the best online courses we can find from multiple sources and acquire the rights to them for our students. Our faculty serve as student mentors: guiding their progress, answering questions, referring them to resources, encouraging success.

The assessments are developed, administered, and graded by a separate assessment group, with specific expertise in assessment.

**Q. If your faculty doesn't teach, how does your accrediting body assess the credentials of instruction providers? Is this an issue for you?**

**A.** Great question that gets at the heart of the whole thing. The accreditors review that the competencies are in fact the right ones and constitute the knowledge and skills a graduate of a certain degree should have. They then assess whether the assessments adequately measure those competencies. If so, the credentials of instruction providers (and faculty) shouldn't matter—if they are successful in teaching the right competencies to a mastery level, they are de facto qualified. ■