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College Guide

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“Competency Based”

by Daniel Luzer

In the future universities might routinely reward academic credit to people based on their actual skills and knowledge, not just on the amount of time they've spent in classrooms. “Competency based” education is becoming popular again.

Basically the idea is that if one can demonstrate knowledge, one can earn credit (and eventually a diploma) for that knowledge; no matter how someone obtained it. It's an idea that's slow to catch on, at least in part because for decades the institutions that awarded credit for “[life experience](#)” were mostly diploma mills.

But some innovative institutions, like the all-online, though nonprofit, [Western Governors University](#) may have changed how observers see education. Well, perhaps. It turns out even WGU, the promising model for change, isn't really using “competency based” assessment to reward academic credit.

According to [a piece](#) by Doug Lederman at *Inside Higher Ed*:

At the core of the fascination with WGU (in addition to its focus on adult students, its comparatively reasonable prices, etc.) is the university's emphasis on gauging its students' academic progress based not on how many credit hours they accumulate and how much time they spend in class, but how much learning they show they have mastered through a series of assessments. Breaking the link between seat time and learning is one way that American colleges and universities can educate more people more efficiently, posit [some] reformers....

But most institutions reward academic credit, and qualify to use federal financial aid, using an academic credit model based on the amount of time students spend in class. For years WGU operated differently. As Lederman explained, “Western Governors was able to enroll students on the federal dole through a ‘demonstration program’ that essentially exempted the entirely online university from a requirement that institutions educate at least half their students in on-ground classes.”

When the demonstration project was supposed to end in 2006, policymakers realized that the traditional rules about time and on-ground classes didn't really apply to WGU; that was the point. And so lawmakers created an alternative policy tailor-made for WGU. Lederman:

Congressional supporters of Western Governors (of which there were many, given the many powerful state politicians who helped give the institution its name) crafted a legislative provision

that, for the first time, allowed an academic program to qualify for federal student aid through Title IV of the Higher Education Act by establishing “an instructional program that, in lieu of credit hours or clock hours as a measure of student learning, utilizes direct assessment of student learning, or recognizes the direct assessment of student learning by others.”

But even Western Governors didn't end up using its own alternative program. The institution uses something very much like credit hours, like everyone else. As Lederman explains:

The university divides the learning competencies it expects students to achieve into units that it equates to credit hours. Students pay a flat rate per term, and while they must complete a minimum number of what WGU calls “competency units” to make sufficient academic progress and qualify for federal student aid, there is no limit on the number of competency units they can earn in any time period. As WGU officials see it, that effectively kills the link between learning and seat time because a student getting credits based on learning she proves she has mastered can earn more credit in a term than would be possible in any classroom-based approach.

Well yes, that possible, but it's not so useful as a reform model. “Competency units” is really just a euphemism for credit hours.

Why did WGU decide to go with the noncontroversial, traditional measure of learning? Basically because it's easier. As the article made clear, using a more traditional credit system made it possible for students to transfer to other institutions and receive corporate tuition reimbursements.

These are practical considerations and very much in the interest of the students, but it doesn't look promising for alternative models.

Alternative education ideas, after all, have to operate in traditional systems and with traditional people.

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