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## Competency-based education is all the rage: What is it?

**Kimberly K. Estep**

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If you've paid any attention to higher education the past couple of years, odds are you've heard the term "competency-based education," or CBE.

Hailed by corporate executives, global foundation presidents and our nation's foremost education experts, competency-based education is already changing how we think about learning.

So, what is it?

Simply put, competency-based education measures learning rather than seat time.

The traditional higher-education model, the format most of us are familiar with, does the opposite — measuring the time students are in class, usually in credit hours or semester hours.

In a traditional school, you have to complete three credit hours for Accounting 101. In a competency-based university, you have to complete a series of assessments and learning benchmarks that prove your mastery of the material covered in Accounting 101.

### STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Simply put, competency-based education measures learning rather than seat time.
- In a traditional school, you have to complete three credit hours for Accounting 101.
- Tennessee's workforce must be equipped to face the challenges of tomorrow.

As chancellor of WGU Tennessee — the nonprofit, online, competency-based university launched in 2013 as part of Gov. Bill Haslam's Drive to 55 effort — I've worked diligently the past two years to articulate just what CBE means and its potential benefits for working Tennesseans who need to get an advanced degree to further their careers.

Take for instance WGU Tennessee graduate Phillip Walley. Phillip had a good career as an information technology professional and had worked in his field for nearly a decade. However, he knew he needed a bachelor's degree if he wanted to advance. He enrolled in WGU Tennessee and moved quickly through basic IT coursework and was able to spend more time on material he was unfamiliar with. Phillip completed his bachelor's degree in 10 months and then went on to earn his master's degree in Information Security Assurance in a single term.

Phillip's story illustrates why competency-based education is ideal for working adults. In many cases, competency-based education can save students time and tuition costs.

At first blush, CBE may seem to be bold and experimental. In practice, though, the idea of certifying a student's competency in a subject area is nothing new. Any IT professional can attest to the importance of earning certifications for his or her career path.

There are Cisco certifications, Microsoft certifications, Oracle certifications and countless others. As part of the licensure process, teachers must pass the Praxis II subject assessment exam. Accountants wishing to become CPAs must first make the grade on the CPA exam, and nurses must pass the NCLEX exam on the way to being licensed.

Attorneys must pass the bar exam to practice law. Employers from a wide range of fields require the assurance that professionals know their stuff, and each certification conferred is a guarantee of competency.

Tennessee's workforce must be equipped to face the challenges of tomorrow, and we'll need to rethink how we learn in order to maximize what we learn.

Adults of diverse backgrounds are retooling their skill sets with degrees for the 21st century economy.

Time is a precious resource, and we must become more efficient in helping students learn. As it becomes more popular and widely adopted across the post-secondary spectrum, competency-based education will prove to be a highly efficient pathway for Tennessee adults who wish to earn an affordable, high-quality degree.

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Kimberly K. Estep, Ph.D., is the chancellor of WGU Tennessee. For more information, visit the WGU Tennessee website, <http://tennessee.wgu.edu/>, or call 855-948-8495.



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