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## Is CBE the OS of Future Higher Ed?

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In a [TechCrunch article](#), Ryan Craig & Joel Hernandez share their take on competency-based education (CBE) - they call it the currently app-less operating system for the future of higher education. I agree competencies are, or rather should be, the backbone of higher education. We should have transparent, 'clickable' credentials that showcase the assessments students did to demonstrate mastery of a specific skill or knowledge set. What, as a higher education researcher and lifelong learner, I don't agree with is that competency-based education should become the only operating system for the future of higher education. I am of the mindset that we need, to quote Miranda Lambert, "[all kinds of kinds](#)." A properly-run competency-based education program that is self-paced, mastery-based may not be the best mode of operation for a learner who is not self-driven, who is not intrinsically motivated. Craig & Hernandez site that CBE programs sell themselves as fast-paced, "allowing students to race to a degree in record time." While it's a perfect sales pitch, it does not quite reflect the reality of CBE. Many students face challenges in getting motivated to complete work - to quote [Tim Urban](#), when there is no deadline, or it's so far out, the panic monster never sets in and work doesn't progress. Though

coaches/mentors/faculty check in on CBE students regularly, it is a primarily self-driven operating system. To use the Craig & Hernandez analogy, the apps don't come pre-installed with the operating system, students have to take agency and put forth effort in ways they may not be accustomed to, especially those coming straight out of K-12. Granted, as [K-12 adopts more competency-based learning](#) themselves, this will gradually shift to where more students are prepared to work in a more personalized, competency-driven environment but that will take time.

Competency-based education has been practiced for over forty years. Institutions like Charter Oak State College, Excelsior College, SUNY Empire State and more have been helping adult learners with college credits and no degree, but often loads of experience, prove mastery in the competencies necessary to earn a degree since the 1970s, when the first CBE boom occurred. These are not sexy programs, they are not the hot new model, but they are proven models that work for self-motivated adult learners. Craig & Hernandez also bring up Western Governors University calling it a "twenty-year overnight success story that is unique and un-replicable." On this point I disagree with them. The competency-based education model that WGU is built on is replicable. And in fact, [WGU has been helping guide](#) 11 community colleges through integrating CBE into their existing organizational structures for the last several years through TAACCCT grants and support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. True, the piece of WGU's history that involved the coming together of 19 western governors to create a shared, online university to serve the populations of their rural states will likely never be directly replicated. But the [guiding principles of competency-based education](#) WGU ascribes to can be replicated.

Craig & Hernandez also perpetuate a really common misconception about competency-based education - that it is no longer tied to the credit hour.

Unfortunately that is only true for a handful of institutions. Currently there are [only six institutions authorized](#) to offer what is called direct assessment competency-based education -- where learning is not tied to the credit hour in any way. The WGU model, as well as those which have been operating for 40 years and the majority of programs that are underdevelopment, ARE tied back to the credit hour - competencies are crosswalked to courses and/or credit hours.

The current [regulatory landscape](#) is driving this - it is a difficult process to get a direct assessment program approved. But because competency-based education is the buzzword that it is, institutions are moving forward with "traditional" CBE or are crafting competency-enhanced programs - that still fit in the traditional course model but have more distinct competencies called out.

So, while I agree that competency-based education is extremely important to the future of higher education, I would not call it the operating system of the future of higher education. It is forcing institutions, as well as students and employers, to question what they want out of a higher education credential and helping push forward change towards a more transparent display of earned credentials. But just like operating systems we will always want choice in higher education, it's human nature. If there is not a choice, someone will create one. It's why we have Android and IOS, Windows and yes, even still a Blackberry OS as choices in our mobile phones. **As it is today, competency-based education will be a choice as a future higher education operating system, but not the only choice.**

Photo Credit: [Esther Vargas](#)

Competency Based Training, Higher Education



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