

Center for American Progress



Meeting Students Where They Are

Profiles of Students in Competency-Based Degree Programs

A publication of the Center for American Progress and the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning

By Rebecca Klein-Collins and Elizabeth Baylor

November 2013

Center for American Progress



Meeting Students Where They Are

Profiles of Students in Competency-
Based Degree Programs

*A publication of the Center for American Progress
and the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning*

By Rebecca Klein-Collins and Elizabeth Baylor

November 2013

Contents

- 1 Introduction and summary**
- 3 What is competency-based education? A closer look**
- 5 Findings and policy recommendations**
- 9 Students in direct assessment programs**
- 15 Students in pioneering programs with a competency focus**
- 20 Students in business-specific CBE programs**
- 26 Conclusion**
- 29 Endnotes**

Introduction and summary

An educated workforce is one of the bedrocks not just of a strong American middle class, but also of a strong U.S. economy. To ensure that America has the most competitive global workforce, President Barack Obama articulated a goal that, by 2020, every American should continue their educational training after high school so that the United States will increase its proportion of college graduates. This ambitious policy objective will require our postsecondary education system to embrace changes and find new ways to improve student success while maintaining affordability and quality.

One way that some postsecondary institutions are innovating is by focusing more on what students learn, rather than where or how long the learning takes place. This can be a more efficient way for students to progress toward a degree, yet it is a very different way for higher education to operate. For more than 100 years, postsecondary education has been designed around the credit hour, a measure of how much time students spend in the classroom. Although it was not originally designed for this purpose, the credit hour is used in higher education as a proxy for student learning, with the student progressing toward a degree by accumulating a prescribed number of these time-based units. That system omits actual measures of what students learn.

An alternative approach is competency-based education, which makes student learning—not time—the focus. Competency-based programs vary widely in their design, but they all explicitly articulate what students must be able to know and do upon graduation—and assessments validate that learning throughout a student’s experience in the program.

This report catalogues stories of average Americans—some who went to college directly after high school, some who are returning to postsecondary education after many years in the workforce, and others who are pursuing graduate studies. All of these students have one thing in common: They are participating in a

competency-based education program that tracks their progress by measuring the knowledge and skills they have acquired. This report demonstrates the positive qualities of competency-based learning and identifies commonalities among student experiences that can inform the policy priorities for those looking to expand and reform postsecondary educational offerings.

What is competency-based education? A closer look

Competency-based education, or CBE, degree programs have been around for 40 years. Institutions have offered CBE in a variety of formats, with some institutions assessing student competencies in the context of a familiar course- and credit-based system, while other institutions are designing degree programs so that student progress is defined primarily by successful completion of competency-based assessments.¹ This latter format, often referred to as a “direct assessment” model, can allow students to progress at their own pace outside of a traditional course schedule.

The various CBE offerings vary in terms of their other components as well: Some are online, some are face-to-face, and some are blended models. Some offer professor-led courses, some offer online but structured learning modules, and others offer no courses at all but rather guide the students in independent study through open educational resources. In terms of assessment, some evaluate student competencies based on the successful completion of real-world projects, some require students to present what they have learned in a portfolio or other written format, and others have developed psychometrically sound computer-delivered exams. Some programs may offer a combination of different kinds of assessments, with each method custom-chosen based on the specific competency to be assessed.

Understanding these variations in program design are helpful for understanding the landscape of CBE today, but understanding the backgrounds and perspectives of the students who choose these programs is equally important.

The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, or CAEL, recently interviewed students who are attending or recently graduated from CBE programs to learn who they are and what their experiences have been in their respective programs. This report shares the profiles of 13 individual students from seven institutions. Their stories help bring the programs to life for those of us observing the resurgence of competency-based education. They also help all of us explore CBE through a different lens and, hopefully, better understand the value of competency-based education and assessment.

Yet they are more than just individual experiences. Common themes emerge from the student profiles that are noteworthy:

The rigor of academic programs that require students to demonstrate learned competencies

- The transferability of acquired competencies to workplace settings
- The value of flexible formats for adult returning students
- The relevance that earning a degree has on a student's career advancement
- The value that peer interactions have on student learning and completion
- The importance of coaches, advisors, and mentors on completion and persistence
- The recognition that what students have learned at work also can "count" toward earning their degree

Findings and policy recommendations

The profiles in this report are designed to share individual experiences, providing context about the backgrounds and aspirations of some nontraditional students pursuing postsecondary education, and identify common themes in the experiences of students enrolled in competency-based education programs. These themes can inform and guide policymakers in supporting the further development of competency-based approaches to postsecondary learning. They include the following:

- **The rigor of demonstrating competencies.** Students are aware that these programs are very different from more traditional learning experiences, and many noted how challenging the assessments could be. Several students told us that one of the biggest challenges was the requirement to prove what they knew in writing. One student said that even though it was difficult, “The writing is where you reflect on what you’ve learned and demonstrate what you’ve learned.” Others noted the fact that there is no such thing as partial credit or squeaking by with a C. Said one, “We had to master the competency. If it wasn’t mastered, we were sent back to work with the professor or coach to get it right.” Another said that he would definitely recommend his program to others “as long as they know this is hard work.”
- **The transferability of competencies to the workplace.** Students noted that the competencies they have had to demonstrate through the program’s assessments have been directly applicable to their day-to-day work lives. One student said that she saw this kind of instruction as a real benefit, and she believes that it gives her an edge over other students in traditional programs. “That’s what employers look for, not how many hours you sit in a classroom,” she said. One student learned so much that was relevant for his job that his boss flew his team to him and had him facilitate a meeting about creating a mission statement. He saw this example as the “biggest indication that I’m actually learning.”

- **The value of flexible formats for adult returning students.** Working adults appreciate programs that allow them to pursue degrees around their work schedules. One M.B.A. student told us, “This was huge for me. I wouldn’t have gone back to school if I had to give up my job. I was only willing to go into so much debt.” There is no single best way to make this happen. Some of the students we interviewed chose institutions offering face-to-face classes on weekday evenings, while others appreciated having online options to accommodate work and family responsibilities.
- **The importance of a degree to advance in a career.** Many of the students we interviewed told us that they had gone back to school because their employers said they could not advance in their careers without a degree. One nursing student explained, “I felt I knew just as much as my colleagues who had a [bachelor’s degree], but I was passed over for advancement because I lacked the degree.” Others in business environments have also worked their way up a career ladder only to find that their progress is stymied because they lack a credential. Some have always dreamed of getting a college degree, while others may not have. One student admitted, “It wasn’t that I wanted to go to school. ... I wanted to be considered as a high-potential employee. I wanted to play in that circle. If they are going to use that as the criteria, I’m going to go get the degree.”
- **The value of peer interactions.** Students in programs that provided opportunities for peer interactions noted that these were important to them. Meanwhile, students in programs with primarily independent learning in online formats missed having those interactions. CBE programs may want to make sure that some connection to and learning from peers is part of the program model.
- **The importance of coaches, advisors, and mentors.** Several students noted the important role that their advisors played in helping them understand the program’s expectations and keeping them motivated. One student described her mentor as her “biggest cheerleader.” Others rely on their coaches to keep them focused. “Having constant conversations going with my coach helps me continue to stay on top of my schoolwork and keep it an active part of my life,” said one student.
- **The recognition that what they have learned at work also can “count” in a degree program.** One student recalled that all of her papers drew on her experiential learning. This made the course material, in her view, “so much easier to learn and exciting to learn because I could relate it to my experiences.”

As demonstrated by the profiles in this report, competency-based education has the potential to help students with varying backgrounds participate successfully in the American postsecondary education system so they can progress in their careers. It is encouraging to see so many new models emerging in recent years. Because competency-based approaches do not easily operate within a credit-hour-based system, however, the number of existing programs is still quite small.

In its wide-ranging plan for economic prosperity, “300 Million Engines of Growth,” the Center for American Progress states that policymakers should work to achieve transformative change in postsecondary education delivery and design, strengthening it for the needs of the 21st-century workforce and student population.² The themes in this report demonstrate that postsecondary education reform should encourage greater participation in competency-based education and smooth the way for more institutions of higher education to develop innovative programs. The following are some recommendations for promoting competency-based education through policy change, which CAP plans to develop and expand upon in its continuing body of work in this policy area:

- **Experiment with authority for financial aid programs decoupled from the credit-hour standard.** As previously recommended by CAP, competency-based education needs broader authority under the Higher Education Act, or HEA, so that students in this type of program remain eligible for federal financial aid.³ The next reauthorization of HEA should identify alternative means of appropriately measuring student progress other than by the credit hour that would allow equivalent levels of aid to be disbursed. This change could allocate federal resources in a way that embraces competency-based programs.
- **Establish quality standards for competency-based education programs.** The greatest resistance to competency-based education is focused on the worry that programs will suffer in quality, particularly programs where faculty serve as learning facilitators rather than instructors. Efforts to expand the availability of competency-based education programs should engage with accrediting bodies to develop a common set of quality standards for competency-based programs and assessments. Such standards would define good quality in the establishment of competency frameworks and the development of valid and reliable assessments, student support, and other program components.

- **Enlist workforce stakeholders to define competencies.** One of the key rationales for embracing competency-based education programs is that students will be well prepared to enter the workforce. To ensure greater alignment between post-secondary education and the workplace, business and industry stakeholders—including employers, labor unions, professional associations, and others—should be enlisted to help define the competencies required for entry-level positions as well as for other job opportunities throughout an individual’s career pathway.

Students in direct assessment programs

Since the late 1990s, Western Governors University, or WGU, has offered online, competency-based degree programs in which students progress toward a post-secondary degree by passing a series of competency-based assessments. Current offerings include teaching licensure and graduate programs, as well as bachelor's and master's degrees in business, information technology, nursing, and health professions. WGU students do not attend traditional courses; rather, faculty coaches work with them to access the learning they need from a variety of online sources in order to prepare for the assessments. This model of CBE prompted Congress to include “direct assessment” as one way that institutions might bypass credit-hour regulations related to federal financial aid. Although WGU never used this provision—nor have other well-established direct assessment programs such as Excelsior College's School of Nursing—other institutions have recently requested it for newer CBE programs.

The first program to apply for the direct assessment provision, Southern New Hampshire University's, or SNHU, College for America program, was recently approved by the U.S. Department of Education.⁴ Launched in 2012, College for America follows a very similar model as WGU. With the help of a coach, each student works through a set of 120 competencies for an associate's degree, using learning resources available to them online.

Other direct assessment models provide more structured learning experiences through online courses or shorter modules, both of which have embedded assessments for the required competencies. One example of this is the Kentucky Community and Technical College System, or KCTCS, Learn on Demand program, which began enrolling students in 2008. Offerings include associate's degrees in the arts, science, business administration, computer and information technologies, and nursing; short-term certificates in computer and information technology; targeted training for specific jobs; and college-readiness courses.

In this section, we hear from three students in direct assessment programs: Marcus, a nursing student in KCTCS's Learn on Demand program; Julie from SNHU's College for America; and L'via, a nursing student at WGU.⁵ A fourth student, Laura, used KCTCS's Learn on Demand to complete the one course she needed to earn her bachelor's degree, showing the flexibility that a competency-based approach can offer the nontraditional learner.

Marcus Carmicle: Building on what he already knows

School: *Kentucky Community and Technical College System Learn on Demand*

Degree goal: *Bachelor of science in nursing*

When Marcus Carmicle graduated from high school in 1989, there was no doubt in his mind that he would enter the nursing profession. Nursing was a family affair: his mother was a licensed practical nurse, or L.P.N., and his two sisters were at various stages in their nursing careers—both would eventually become registered nurses, or R.N.s. Marcus remembers: “I liked hearing about how someone could nurse another back to health and care for someone else. ... I wanted to care and nurse others back to health myself. My family instilled in me the importance of helping others.”

Marcus completed a nurse aide certification course at the Bluegrass Community and Technical College, or BCTC, in Lexington, Kentucky. Once certified, he worked in a nursing home for one year and then in a hospital. In 1993, he returned to BCTC to earn his L.P.N. license.

For the past 19 years, Marcus has worked as an L.P.N. in a variety of settings, including hospitals, nursing homes, and managed care systems. He now works with the state Medicaid program as a concurrent review nurse overseeing patient care in the hospital and coordinating discharge plans to ensure that patients return home safely. Marcus has thoroughly enjoyed his tenure as an L.P.N., but he has always planned to return to school to get his R.N. degree like his sisters. In addition to the increased demand and job opportunities, Marcus wants to be able to do more for patients as an R.N.



Work and financial concerns had always convinced him to put off going for the R.N. until he found the online associate degree in nursing program offered by KCTCS's Learn on Demand. For Marcus, the program was the perfect fit for his credentials, experience, and schedule—and the price was right. Cheaper than other programs he researched, KCTCS will cost Marcus around \$18,000 to complete his degree.

The fact that almost all of KCTCS's courses are offered asynchronously and online was a big draw for Marcus. Currently, he works full time, and Learn on Demand courses are accessible online 24/7. Being able to start a class and do his coursework whenever he wants, as opposed to being restricted by semester dates or class schedules, has allowed Marcus to jumpstart his education.

When entering the Learn on Demand program, students take competency tests in math, reading, and writing to determine if they must take Learn on Demand college-readiness courses or if they can proceed directly to college-level courses. Marcus needed just one math-readiness course.

All college-readiness courses and the 77 Learn on Demand courses are taught in five-week modular formats with three to five modules per course. In order for students to progress, each module must be completed and passed before moving on to the next.

Alternatively, students can test out of modules completely by taking the requisite modular pre-test. If the student scores high enough, they can skip directly to the module's post-test. This modular pre- and post-testing is another way KCTCS can recognize prior learning—which is the thrust of the Learn on Demand model—allowing experienced students like Marcus to skip modules in subjects they have already mastered and move faster through the coursework needed to complete the degree.

Another aspect of the program that appealed to Marcus was the amount of support students receive. Students are paired with an advisor who helps them develop an educational plan for degree completion and a student success coach who enrolls students in courses and answers any questions about the program itself. When students enroll in a module, they work with the module instructor who is available to answer questions about course topics.

Marcus advises that it takes a motivated person to meet the demands of the program, saying, “A Learn on Demand student must be completely dedicated and self-motivated because there is no one standing over you telling you when things are due, and each module must be completed within the five-week period.”

All in all, however, Marcus loves the program. It meets his needs in terms of time commitment, cost, student support, and prior learning. In the future, Marcus looks forward to using his degree to become a supervisor or a director of a unit, a nursing home, or even a department. Marcus explained enthusiastically, “I cannot imagine doing anything else in my life.”

Julie Braley: Showing that there is more than one way to achieve

School: *Southern New Hampshire University College for America*

Degree goal: *Associate of arts in general studies*

After high school, Julie Braley pursued a degree in computer science at the University of Vermont, but it was not a good match for her. She changed course and established a successful career as a recruiter. Julie found the work rewarding, but she continued to think about her education: “The company hired a new vice president of human resources, and she took me under her wing and gave me exposure to skills I never knew before. ... I realized that if I wanted to continue to advance, I needed to finish my degree.”



Julie’s firm started a new partnership with College for America and she was attracted to the program because of its nontraditional model. “In the overview, they talked about the competencies,” Julie says. “I liked that the classes seemed to directly relate to what I am doing now.”

Julie has had to demonstrate a high level of proficiency to accomplish each project, using both technical and soft skills. “It forced me to rethink my approach, adjust my presentation, and be mindful about what type of information I had to include. I see a major parallel in the projects I work on with my [College for America] task families and the types of projects I do at work.”

Overall, Julie says, “I want my children to see that education is important, but I also want them to be comfortable to find the path that’s right for them. Participating in a program like College for America shows them there’s more than one way to achieve.”

L'via Weisinger: The appeal of learning independently

School: *Western Governors University*

Degree goal: *Bachelor of science in nursing*

L'via Weisinger received her first bachelor's degree in 1988 in art and fashion business. She worked in the fashion industry before realizing that it was not a good fit for her. L'via went back to school in 1992 to earn an associate's degree in nursing and has been a registered nurse for close to 17 years.

However, L'via decided to pursue a bachelor of science in nursing, or B.S.N., at Western Governors University to progress in her career. "I felt I knew just as much as my colleagues who had a B.S.N., but I was passed over for advancement because I lacked the degree," she says. With her previous education and years of experience in the field, L'via was able to bring a lot of prior learning to her degree program, which helped her save both time and money. "They went over my transcript and gave me credit wherever possible."

At Western Governors University's B.S.N. program, the learning and competencies are assessed through writing. Each course requires several papers. "You really have to process, think, and apply," L'via says. "This program is perfect for adults who have some competency in the subject area. If they just do the tasks required for each course, they will knock them out. If the subject is new to them, the program will teach them how to find the information they need to prove their competence and they will succeed."



Laura Gibson: Using the competency approach to fill small gaps

School: *Kentucky Community and Technical College System*

Degree goal: *Bachelor's degree*

Sometimes all someone needs is one course—or even a part of one course—to meet a learning need. A competency-based approach can make that possible and allow the student to reach a goal on a flexible schedule.

After a 30-year career as a physician's assistant, Laura Gibson decided that she wanted a change. She pursued a job at Sullivan University as an instructor in its medical assistant program, but there was only one problem: She needed a bachelor's degree for the job. The good news was that she only needed to take one math class to finish the degree she had started at Eastern Kentucky University.



Laura learned about KCTCS's Learn on Demand program, which allowed her to take a single class and complete her degree.

Laura now teaches in the medical assistant program at Sullivan University and took another job at KCTCS teaching remedial algebra, developmental math, and general education development, or GED, courses. The Learn on Demand program at KCTCS helped Laura meet her goal. "If you want to change directions in your life and want to try something out, Learn on Demand is the way to do it," she says. "I would highly recommend this to anyone who prefers learning at their own pace."

Students in pioneering programs with a competency focus

As noted above, competency-based approaches to postsecondary education have existed for the past 40 years, getting their start in several adult-learner-focused institutions that emerged in the 1970s. Two of these institutions are DePaul University’s School for New Learning, or SNL, in Chicago, and Alverno College in Milwaukee.

These programs were launched in a very different era of higher education, so they still offer students some of the more traditional components—such as face-to-face courses—as options for students. They were decidedly ahead of their time, however, in defining the competencies required for a degree, assessing students on each of the required competencies—SNL uses the term “competences” while Alverno uses the term “abilities”—and recognizing student learning no matter where or how the student acquired it. These programs are considered by organizations such as CAEL to be leaders in the use of prior learning assessment, particularly portfolio assessment, which requires student to submit a written document that describes what they learned, how they learned it, and how they have applied that learning. Student reflection on the learning process is paramount.⁶

In this section, we share the stories of four students: Joy, Franchon, and Linda from SNL and Jennifer from Alverno.

Joy Boggs: Drawn to the rigor

School: *DePaul University School for New Learning*

Degree completed: *Bachelor of arts*

When Joy Boggs graduated from high school in 1989, she could not wait to go off to college. She started at Kalamazoo College in Michigan, only to return home a year and a half later. Joy’s father was ill, and she had to work and help support her family.



Over the past 25 years, Joy has worked in large nonprofits and moved up to positions in the upper tier of the organizations. She has worked for large companies such as Blue Cross and Blue Shield and has developed an impressive background in process and administrative management and organizational performance. Joy reached the position of administrative supervisor for the Office of the General Counsel at the Chicago Housing Authority, but she always felt the urge to return to school and finish her undergraduate degree. Joy took a new job as the business manager at the Office of the General Counsel at DePaul University and resumed her studies at DePaul's School of New Learning.

Joy did not have the luxury of time and knew she had to find a program that fit both the constraints of her demanding career and caring for her two elderly parents. She recalls thinking, "The SNL program is impressive. It is rigorous; it takes rigor to be in that environment. ... This was my metric: Does the program accept past college credit and experience, and is it sensitive to the needs of working adults?"

Joy found a mentor with whom she would work over the next two years and who was instrumental in building a relationship of mutual respect and understanding. "[My advisor] understood me; it was like being in the presence of a professional partner. I explained who I was, how I work, my training, and what I would bring to the table. I told him 'I need you to support me in navigating through this institution.' We were very efficient."

The program's competencies were assessed through writing. Joy reflects on the intensive writing she was required to do and considers this the greatest skill she has taken away from the program. "I became a better writer," she says. "That is worth the price of admission. The fact that I was trained to write as often as I was prepared me for graduate school. It was not a big deal for me to write a response paper, provide analysis, and offer critique." Joy completed a master of arts with distinction in women and gender studies in 2013. The fact that the program is competency driven and that the competencies are evaluated through writing was, for Joy, "extraordinary. The majority of what I do, influencing decisions impacting many people, is done in writing. This was the right program for me. It relates to what I do every day."

Franchon Foster: Proving her competence

School: *DePaul University School for New Learning*

Degree completed: *Bachelor of arts in organizational leadership*

When Franchon Foster was in high school in the 1980s, she took advantage of a work-study option to begin a career in the financial industry. She advanced to high levels of responsibility, but eventually Franchon realized she would need a degree in order to progress further. “I wanted to be considered as a high-potential employee,” Franchon says. “If they are going to use that as the criteria, I’m going to go get the degree. But it still took me three or four years to get there in my mind.”

After doing a lot of research on various degree programs, Franchon chose DePaul University’s SNL. She came to appreciate DePaul’s use of competencies. She explains, “For me, having the expectations clearly defined is important. In every course, I was given a competence statement, and then I would need to take my learning and use that to demonstrate a competence.” To earn her quantitative-reasoning credential, Franchon was able to draw on her work experience. “I was already able to work with an Excel spreadsheet or Access database—and those are part of the way to demonstrate this competency. Being able to draw on my work experience was helpful.”

Six months after starting at SNL, Franchon got a new job as manager, yet she kept going to school and reached her goals right on schedule. When she stops to think about it, she cannot help but find it amazing that she started from a place of not wanting to go to college, but then she went and did well. “It’s such a sense of accomplishment,” she says.



Linda Jepsen: Using her experiential learning

School: *DePaul University School for New Learning*

Degree completed: *Bachelor of arts in organizational management*



After high school, Linda went directly to college, and, although family and financial issues prevented her from completing her degree at that time, it was always a goal. Linda worked in sports administration for local colleges and a college athletic conference, rising to the level of director of sport services. Despite her strong work history, she could not advance to the top positions without a bachelor's degree. Linda, now 57, enrolled in DePaul's SNL. She recalls, "I ran around and told everyone 'I just enrolled in SNL, I'm going to get this degree,' because I felt like the more people I told, the harder it would be for me to back out."

At SNL, there is a deliberative approach: students have an academic advisor and professional advisors, and they identify their academic and career goals. "The program is mapped out step by step by step," Linda says.

Students demonstrate mastery of competences in any of three ways: attending on-campus or online classes, independent study, or a prior learning portfolio that demonstrates sufficient knowledge in the subject. When taking courses, Linda recalls that all of her papers drew on her experiential learning. This made the course material, in her view, "so much easier to learn and exciting because I could relate it to my experiences."

Now that she has earned her degree, Linda no longer has a ceiling preventing her from moving into any position that fits her interests. She adds, "The self-confidence the degree gave me is something I could never have imagined."

Jennifer Hidalgo: Coming out of her shell

School: *Alverno College*

Degree goal: *Bachelor of science in nursing*

When Jennifer Hidalgo entered college, she was initially on the dean's list but ran into trouble after major life changes interfered. Because of anxiety, Jennifer says, "I would end up giving up halfway through a course." At age 23, she found herself working in retail and was worried that she would be "stuck working a minimum-wage job for the rest of my life."

Jennifer decided to go back to school and pursue a degree in nursing. "Nursing is the perfect blend of science, health, and teaching—three things I was always interested in," she says. At the urging of her cardiologist uncle, Jennifer researched the nursing program at Alverno College and was immediately intrigued by its unique ability-based curriculum.

Alverno's ability-based curriculum requires outcomes or objectives for every assignment, which serve as guidelines for how to successfully complete a task. The B.S.N. program at Alverno also requires a practical application of knowledge, as well as a conceptual mastering of the competencies.

Jennifer particularly liked that the classes help prepare for the NCLEX, the nursing licensure exam. "The exams that nursing majors take for their classes do a great job at prepping students for the actual NCLEX because we get used to that format," she says.

Alverno College also requires its bachelor's degree students to take 20 credits in a field outside of their field of study. Jennifer was able to transfer all of her general education prerequisites.⁷ "They make it easy for adults with prior college credit to go back to school and earn a degree."



Students in business-specific CBE programs

Traditional business-degree programs have long required students to apply what they have learned in the context of “real-world” scenarios or case studies. Thus, it cannot be surprising that many competency-based programs offered today are in business administration. The competency frameworks are frequently developed in collaboration with employer or industry representatives, and assessments are designed to resemble the actual activities that are required in a business environment.

The structure of a business-focused CBE program, however, can vary widely. Two institutions demonstrate this well. Southern New Hampshire University offers a three-year bachelor’s degree in business administration that was designed around a set of competencies. In this program, classes are interdisciplinary “modules” rather than the traditional three-credit courses, and content is planned deliberately across the modules. Each semester, students participate in a weeklong “integrating experience,” a group project in which students use what they have learned to solve real business challenges. Through this program design, students master the same knowledge and skills in three years as they could in a four-year traditional program, saving both time and money.⁸

In the Westminster College project-based M.B.A. program, students learn through the process of completing 25 different projects that require them to demonstrate mastery of 80 different competencies. Students progress at their own speed through the program with the assistance of a faculty coach. Students spend two days on campus each semester in workshops, and the rest of the program is completed online.⁹ Westminster offers a similar program for a bachelor’s degree in business administration.

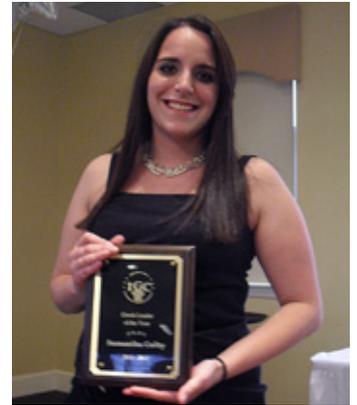
In this section, we hear from four students: Samantha and James from SNHU’s three-year honors program, K.C. and Jordan from Westminster College’s M.B.A. program, and Travis from Westminster’s bachelor’s degree program.

Samantha Colby: 'It's all about mastering those skills and competencies'

School: *Southern New Hampshire University 3Year Honors Program*

Degree goal: *Bachelor's degree in business administration*

Samantha Colby graduated from Whitman-Hanson Regional High School in 2010. While she led the life of a typical teenager growing up in Massachusetts—holding pre-college jobs in food service and earning minimum wage, there was nothing typical about Samantha. She had a plan for her future. “I wanted to break into the business world,” she says. Samantha toured Southern New Hampshire University initially because it was close to home, but she was quickly sold on the three-year honors program in business administration. “I’ve always been a great student, and I wanted to be challenged,” she remarks. “The honors program caught my eye. It was only three years, and the cost savings was a big draw for me.”



On the campus tour, Samantha knew this was not just a typical college program. The faculty and staff were engaged and passionate, which was not the experience Samantha had visiting other universities. “You could see the passion they had for students, and they immediately took an interest in my career goals,” she says. Samantha did not learn about the competency-based aspect of the program right away, until the program director explained it to her. “Once it was explained to me, I got it. It’s all about mastering those skills and competencies.”

Instruction was delivered in a variety of ways: traditional courses in a classroom setting, intensive hands-on projects, and research cases involving real companies. The class size was small, which appealed to Samantha. From the very beginning, Samantha was introduced to teamwork and collaboration through the many group projects and presentations. “I was in the same classes with the same 35 students. They pushed me to be a better student.”

Each semester, the three-year honors program in business has a weeklong “integrating experience,” a group project where students use what they have learned to solve real business challenges. Students have worked with the Robin Hood Foundation, Disney, and Nissan, gaining valuable professional and academic experience applying competencies in everyday life. “I started to notice changes in myself, and I could reflect in hindsight how I used certain competencies such as strategic management or research.”

Another asset to the program is the built-in networking component. During the “integrating experience” students interact with clients and businesses to demonstrate what they have learned, but students are also required to network beyond class. “It took me a while to network,” Samantha says. “My professors pushed me and now I realize how valuable it is. There is a great network for students here, through the community and alumni.”

Samantha sees the competency-based instruction as a big benefit because it allowed her to showcase the skills she learned along the way, which she feels give her an edge over other students in traditional programs. “That’s what employers look for, not how many hours you sit in a classroom.”

Samantha felt the program advisors went above and beyond what is normally required, working on behalf of the students. “They treated us with a high level of respect,” she says. “There was a check-in throughout the semester where we could reflect, talk about our goals and how the classes were going, what we liked and did not like. They respected what we were saying and helped us with what we wanted or needed.”

Annual tuition at SNHU is \$40,000 per year, which includes room and board.¹⁰ Through the three-year honors program in business, Samantha was able to save the cost of a fourth year, or \$40,000. Additionally, Samantha received a \$15,000 per semester academic scholarship from SNHU, as long as she held a 3.0 grade-point average. Her total costs to receive her bachelor’s degree were \$75,000, which she paid for through financial aid and student loans.

The three-year honors program in business proved to be a perfect fit for Samantha—from the small class sizes to the intense and challenging team projects. She also liked the easy interaction with the advisors; she felt comfortable to ask for guidance and help when she needed it. “I truly got a great education.”

James Wersackas: A program tailored to career goals

School: *Southern New Hampshire University 3Year Honors Program*

Degree goal: *Bachelor's degree in business administration*

James Wersackas, a 20-year-old from Lynnfield, Massachusetts, chose SNHU's three-year honors program because of its convenient location, small class size, and practical experience.

James particularly appreciates the real-world scenarios introduced at the beginning of each course and analyzed throughout the term. Students often reflected on how one scenario relates to concepts learned during prior course projects. During a calculus class, for example, James had had to forecast the annual earnings of a sample company, using knowledge from prior coursework on research methods and corporate filing documents, as well as newly acquired calculus skills. This exercise synthesized the content of three courses into one assignment or competency demonstration.

According to James, another beneficial approach is that the program requires students to participate in group projects so they learn to interact well with others who invariably have different approaches and perspectives. Group tasks—such as agreeing on the presentation content, dividing up tasks, holding each other accountable, and completing the work within a single week—have given James experience in conflict management and developing productive business relationships.

The combination of competency-based learning and the ability to tailor class assignments to specific career goals provides James with increased confidence that he will be prepared to develop valuable business solutions for his future employers and clients.



K.C. Oakley: Olympic business ideas

School: *Westminster College*

Degree goal: *Master's degree in business administration*

K.C. is a graduate student from northern California who is currently on the U.S. Olympic skiing team and is completing a master's degree at the same time. K.C. attended the University of California, Berkeley, and majored in psychology.



After graduation, K.C. qualified for the Olympic team, where she took advantage of their 80 percent tuition-assistance policy to attend Westminster College's M.B.A. program.

Westminster's competency-based M.B.A. program requires students to complete 20 projects that are designed around competencies. The projects are organized into sequences of six projects per semester that focus on a given theme. For example, K.C. is currently in the second sequence with projects that focus on the different aspects of marketing a product, including verifying product viability, advertising, and promotion. "It is very focused on your goals and applying the material to where you see yourself in your career. ... I am actually using what I'm learning in my current sequence to develop the marketing plan for the foundation I am working on. ... Others, I know, are using it in their businesses where they work."

K.C. is very satisfied with the program, and notes, "Now that I understand so many of the different parts of how business works, I find my mind racing and excited about all of the businesses that I want to start. So [the program] is definitely preparing me for the next step after skiing."

Jordan Jones: Learning in a 'real-world' environment

School: Westminster College

Degree goal: Master's degree in business administration

Jordan Jones's college experience was ultimately successful, but also a textbook example of today's "mobile learner." He took classes at Utah State, the University of Utah, and a community college, and finally finished his bachelor's degree at the University of Phoenix.

Now age 34, Jordan has worked for many years as a sales operation consultant with Verizon Wireless. In recent years, Jordan developed a new passion for reading and learning, which led him to pursue an M.B.A. at Westminster College.

The best part of the program for Jordan is the practical application of knowledge. "When I was looking at degree requirements, the advisor spoke about this project-based M.B.A. program that was unique to Westminster, that it was modeled after a real world type of environment," he says. "She told me that with a project-based M.B.A. program, I would be demonstrating an understanding of the material at my own job. That stood out for me."



Photo courtesy of Terah Rae

Jordan has been able to demonstrate his leadership skills and translate his academic experience to the workplace. For example, after completing an exercise on corporate values at Westminster, Jordan helped develop a mission statement for his team at Verizon.

Halfway to earning his M.B.A., Jordan is also impressed by the level of attention he receives from staff, faculty, and advisors in the program. Jordan was assigned a mentor at the beginning of the program who has taken a personal interest in his success. “He always keeps me aware of opportunities around me, makes sure I’m not misdirected, and that I’m finding a practical application for my knowledge.”

Travis Dom: Putting his learning to use

School: Westminster College
Degree goal: Bachelor’s degree

Travis Dom comes from a family of six and is the second in his family to attend college. Travis started his college career straight out of high school, but left for a two-year mission to Peru. When he returned, he got married and began working full time. Frequent changes in his work schedule prevented him from attending traditional classes. Last year, he was promoted to a human resources generalist role where his superiors began encouraging him to complete his bachelor’s degree after several months.

Westminster’s competency-based bachelor’s degree program is a good fit for him because “I don’t have to worry about schedules. It’s all done on my own, and I have coaches who are all about helping me, even on holidays.” Although Travis still has several sequences to complete, he is already using what has been learning at his company. He explains, “When I speak about the [tools or techniques] we’ll use [to make improvements], I know about what it really can do and how we can really use it.” For Travis, this has demonstrated the value of getting a degree even before he has finished the program.



Conclusion

The impact that competency-based education can have on the workforce prospects of the students profiled is clear. As an adult who had not finished college directly after high school, Jennifer Hidalgo had few skills and was facing long-term minimum-wage employment. Alverno College’s nursing program used practical applications and required Jennifer to master the competencies needed to become a licensed nurse with a bachelor’s degree—a field with tremendous employment prospects in the 21st-century economy. Samantha Colby, a more traditional student, was able to use competency-based education to complete her degree in just three years, lowering the cost and shortening the time she spent in the classroom without shortchanging the quality and depth of her academic experience. Our national imperative of a well-prepared and educated populace prepared for the jobs of this century requires new methods of postsecondary education delivery. Competency-based education should be at the center of these innovations.

For further reading

Fain, Paul. 2013. "Rise of Customized Learning." *Inside Higher Ed* (<http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2013/03/05/competency-based-education-continues-spread> [November 2013]).

Klein-Collins, Rebecca. 2012. "Competency-Based Degree Programs in the U.S.: Postsecondary Credentials for Measureable Student Learning and Performance." Chicago: Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (http://www.cael.org/pdfs/2012_CompetencyBasedPrograms).

Laitinen, Amy. 2012. "Cracking the Credit Hour." New York: New America Foundation and Education Sector (http://higheredwatch.newamerica.net/sites/newamerica.net/files/policydocs/Cracking_the_Credit_Hour_Sept5_0.pdf).

LeBlanc, Paul J. 2013. "Thinking about Accreditation in a Rapidly Changing World." *EDUCAUSE Review* 48 (2) (<http://www.educause.edu/ero/article/thinking-about-accreditation-rapidly-changing-world>).

Acknowledgments

CAEL's Becky Klein-Collins edited this collection of interviews, with additional editorial input from David Bergeron at the Center for American Progress. The student interviews were conducted and prepared by Klein-Collins, along with Kathleen Glancey, Holly Holbrook, and Avi Kaufman.

The Center for American Progress and the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning are grateful to the seven institutions that introduced us to the students profiled in this publication. In particular, we acknowledge:

- Jennifer Share, College for America
- Jeana Abromeit, Alverno College
- Chris Hoffman, Westminster College
- Sally Johnstone and Silvia Navehar, Western Governors University

- Jay Box and Sandra Cook, Kentucky Community and Technical College System's Learn on Demand
- Ashley Liadis, Southern New Hampshire University's 3Year Honors Program
- Ann Stanford, DePaul University School for New Learning

We are also grateful to the students who generously shared their stories:

- Julie Braley, Southern New Hampshire University's College for America
- Marcus Carmicle, Kentucky Learn on Demand
- L'via Weisinger, Western Governors University
- Laura Gibson, Kentucky Learn on Demand
- Franchon Foster, DePaul University School for New Learning
- Joy Boggs, DePaul University School for New Learning
- Linda Jepsen, DePaul University School for New Learning
- Jennifer Hidalgo, Alverno College
- Samantha Colby, Southern New Hampshire University 3Year Honors Program
- James Wersackas, Southern New Hampshire University 3Year Honors Program
- K.C. Oakley, Westminster College
- Jordan Jones, Westminster College

Finally, we are grateful for support from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the foundation's leadership in promoting competency-based education.

Endnotes

- 1 Rebecca Klein-Collins, "Competency-Based Degree Programs in the U.S.: Postsecondary Credentials for Measureable Student Learning and Performance" (Chicago: Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, 2012), available at http://www.cael.org/pdfs/2012_CompencyBasedPrograms.
- 2 Jennifer Erickson and Michael Ettlinger, "300 Million Engines of Growth: A Middle-Out Plan for Jobs, Business, and a Growing Economy" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2013), available at <http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/economy/report/2013/06/13/66204/300-million-engines-of-growth>.
- 3 Louis Soares, "A 'Disruptive' Look at Competency-Based Education: How the Innovative Use of Technology Will Transform the College Experience" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2012), available at http://www.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/issues/2012/06/pdf/comp_based_education.pdf.
- 4 For more information, see College for America, "A Milestone for Competency-Based Higher Ed," available at <http://collegeforamerica.org/latest/entry/a-milestone-for-competency-based-higher-ed> (last accessed November 2013).
- 5 For more information, see "Western Governors University," available at www.wgu.edu (last accessed November 2013); College for America, "About College for America," available at <http://collegeforamerica.org/about> (last accessed November 2013); "Kentucky Community and Technical College System Online Learn on Demand," available at <http://learnondemand.kctcs.edu> (last accessed November 2013).
- 6 For more information, see "DePaul School for New Learning," available at <http://snl.depaul.edu> (last accessed November 2013); "Alverno College," available at www.alverno.edu (last accessed November 2013).
- 7 Alverno College, "Alverno Advantage, 2013-14 Bulletin," available at <http://www.alverno.edu/media/alvernocollege/admissions/pdfs/Alverno%20Advantage%20Bulletin.pdf> (last accessed November 2013).
- 8 For more information, see Southern New Hampshire University, "3Year Honors Program in Business (BS)," available at <http://www.snhu.edu/2220.asp> (last accessed November 2013).
- 9 For more information, see Westminster, "The Project-based MBA," available at <http://www.westminstercollege.edu/mba/index.cfm?parent=1086&detail=1419&content=11282> (last accessed November 2013).
- 10 College Navigator, "Southern New Hampshire University: Tuition, Fees and Estimated Student Expenses," available at <http://nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator/?q=southern+new+hampshire&s=all> (last accessed November 2013).

The Center for American Progress is a nonpartisan research and educational institute dedicated to promoting a strong, just, and free America that ensures opportunity for all. We believe that Americans are bound together by a common commitment to these values and we aspire to ensure that our national policies reflect these values. We work to find progressive and pragmatic solutions to significant domestic and international problems and develop policy proposals that foster a government that is “of the people, by the people, and for the people.”

Center for American Progress

