

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

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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.

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.”

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