

Regional Accreditation: Competency-Based Education

The seven regional accrediting commissions share a common understanding of terms used to define competency-based education and its most recent application in programs that use direct assessment as the means to recognize student learning.

Definition: In general, competency-based education (CBE) is an outcomes-based approach to earning a college degree or other credential. Competencies are statements of what students can do as a result of their learning¹ at an institution of higher education. While competencies can include knowledge or understanding, in the main they emphasize what students can do with their knowledge. Students progress through a degree or credential program by demonstrating competencies specified at the course level and/or program level. The curriculum is structured around the specified competencies, and satisfactory academic progress is expressed as the attainment or mastery of the identified competencies. Because competencies are often anchored to external expectations, such as those of employers, to pass a competency, students must generally perform at a level considered to be very good or excellent.

Structure: Competency-based education has two principal approaches:

1. a course/credit-based approach, and
2. a direct assessment approach.

In a course/credit-based approach, the demonstration of competencies is embedded into a conventional curriculum comprising courses to be completed to earn credits toward a degree or credential. Course/credit-based programs generally enroll students in traditional academic terms and award credits for courses successfully completed. Students may accelerate their learning and receive credit for the course when they have demonstrated mastery of the competencies by passing a summative assessment. Institutions may elect to create two academic transcripts, one that displays the credits earned (and grade point average or GPA) and one that specifies the competencies attained.

Direct assessment, (a term used by the Department of Education), represents a subset of competency-based education, one that is not based on semesters (or academic terms) or credits. The direct assessment approach thus disregards conventional courses and bases the evaluation of student achievement and the award of a degree or credential solely on the demonstration of competencies. Direct assessment programs allow students to proceed at their own pace rather than to progress through courses offered in a traditional academic term. Because conventional grades are not assigned and no term length is imposed, the transcript reflects competencies attained rather than grades and/or credit

¹ Students who are awarded credit or advanced into a program based on demonstrated knowledge or competencies attained before enrollment participate in prior learning assessment (PLA)

hours earned. And as with all competency-based education, students are expected to demonstrate the competency at a high level of achievement. Students demonstrate the competencies while they are enrolled in the program; transfer credit or prior learning assessment is not permitted in direct assessment programs or in the direct assessment portion of a “partial direct assessment” program. Direct assessment programs establish “credit-hour equivalencies” for the student learning outcomes they evaluate and may choose to provide a transcript indicating course/credit equivalencies in addition to the competency transcript.

In establishing credit hour equivalencies, institutions will be expected to:

1. draw upon their previously defined policies in the credit hour (consistent with federal regulation); and
2. focus on the amount of learning but not the time component of learning.

A third, hybrid approach, combines the course-based approach and the direct assessment approach. Hybrid programs allow students to complete a degree or credential through a combination of direct assessment of competencies and credit hours.

Approval of Competency-Based Education Program by the Accrediting Agency

Course/credit-based programs: The first time an institution offers a credit-based CBE program, it must be approved by its regional accreditor as a substantive change; the accreditor will provide guidance about the submission of future CBE programs. A program may be considered to be competency-based when all of the courses (for the program, for general education, for the major) have learning goals expressed as competencies approved at the program level (i.e., any instructor teaching a course will teach it as a competency-based course) and each student must demonstrate mastery of every competency in a course to earn credit for the course.

Direct assessment programs: Per federal regulations, direct assessment programs must be approved by the accreditor because the degree/credential is awarded only on the basis of the attainment of competencies and not on the award of credit). Therefore institutions proposing to offer direct assessment programs must submit their plans to their accrediting agency for approval prior to implementation. Federal regulations require accreditors to incorporate into their substantive change review an assessment of the sufficiency of faculty resources to support the program, including the qualifications of instructional staff². In addition, accreditors are required to evaluate and approve the institution’s methodology for determining the credit hour equivalence of the direct assessment measures.

² Institutions that disaggregate the faculty roles (e.g., as subject matter experts, mentors, coaches, assessors) must demonstrate the sufficiency of expertise in the content or professional area, the availability of content area experts and others to support student learning and that the various roles add up to perform the functions of traditional faculty.

Hybrid programs: When an institution proposes to offer a program 50% or more of which can be completed via direct assessment (as defined above), it must submit its plans for approval as a substantive change prior to implementation.³

Institutions are directed to their regional accreditor for specific substantive change policies and guidelines and application directions.

Evaluation Considerations: In evaluating competency-based and direct assessment programs, regional accreditors will include the following considerations:

1. The institution demonstrates the capacity to offer competency-based or direct assessment programs, including administrative capacity and significant expertise in assessment to ensure the reliability and validity of the assessments.
2. Most learning outcomes emphasize performance, not simply knowledge.
3. Competencies are externally referenced (e.g., by convened groups of employers, professional advisory committees, or licensure requirements).
4. The institution ensures “regular and substantive interaction” with faculty, as defined by the Department of Education, and appropriate services for students.
5. The institution demonstrates that the competencies for a degree cohere to support the claims being made for the qualifications of graduates, including at the undergraduate level those traditionally associated with general education and the major or concentration.
6. The institution demonstrates that the level and complexity of the competencies are congruent with the achievement expected at a particular degree level (e.g., a competency in oral presentation skills for a B.S. in management is demonstrated at the baccalaureate level).
7. The quality of demonstration of the competence is judged to be at or near the ‘excellent’ range for each competency.
8. A student must pass each competency in order to earn the degree or certificate.
9. The institution follows good practices in assessment and measurement (e.g., determines reliability and validity, has multiple forms or prompts for each competency).
10. A high proportion of the competencies represent authentic demonstrations.
11. The institution validates the quality of its program through feedback from students and graduates as well as measures appropriate to the external reference of the competencies (e.g., licensure passage rates, earnings of graduates, feedback from employers who helped articulate the desired competencies).

5.25.2015

³ The Department of Education also requires accreditor approval for any partial direct assessment program. Institutions should check with their accreditor regarding specifics.