TO: Members of the Academic Affairs Think Tank
FROM: Kristin Esterberg, Salem State University
John Saltmarsh, NERCHE
DATE: March 19, 2014
RE: Upcoming Think Tank Meeting – Friday, March 28, 2014

We look forward to seeing you at the third meeting of the Academic Affairs Think Tank on:

Friday, March 28, 2014
10:00AM until 2:00PM
in the
Boardroom
Third Floor
Rauch Administration Center
Bentley University

Please RSVP to NERCHE by
Tuesday, March 11, 2014, by phone at
(617) 287-7740 or via email at nerche@umb.edu.

Agenda

10:00 - 10:20 AM: WELCOME & INTRODUCTIONS
10:20 - 10:30 AM: News from NERCHE
10:30 AM- Noon DISCUSSION TOPIC: Refocusing on Competency-based Learning
Facilitator: Carl Lovitt, Central Connecticut State University

High-profile foundations, the federal government, higher education associations, technology entrepreneurs, employers, and the public are united in their recognition of the importance of post-secondary education to the well-being of individuals, the economy, and society as a whole. The current demand for college credentials is unprecedented, even as public confidence in higher education has waned. A report published jointly by the Lumina Foundation and Gallup (2012) found that “Americans indicate they are ready for a redesign in the mechanisms for delivering and awarding higher education certificates and other high-quality degrees” (9). There are several factors driving the calls for reform, among them, the rising costs of a college education; a weak job market; changing student populations, including a rise in the number of adult learners,¹ and calls for transparency with respect to what a college degree represents, as well as what an investment in a college education will yield.

¹ Cruce, T. M. & Hillman, N. W. (2012). Preparing for the silver tsunami: The demand for higher education among older adults, Research in Higher Education, 53,593-613. The authors report that the rate of increase in the numbers of traditional-age college students will slow in the next decade, and, in some areas of the country, college enrollments among this population will decline. At the same time, the population of adults over the age 55 who are interested in pursuing some type of formal learning in a higher education setting will rise.
A lack of consensus about what students should know as a result of a college education has emerged as a significant obstacle to meaningful educational reform. “What exactly a college degree signifies is now so variable across institutions, and, for that matter, within the same institution,” writes Andrew Delbanco, “that having a degree doesn’t mean much either, leaving it at risk of becoming what one writer long ago called ‘merely a formal and unmeaning certificate.’” What students should learn, how they should learn it, and how we know that they have learned it, have persisted as contentious issues in higher education.

The recent resurgence of interest in competency-based learning -- from stakeholders both inside and outside of the academy -- represents an attempt to address this and other issues. Competency-based education, in one form or another, dates back to the early 1960s in U.S. higher education. For decades a modest number of institutions, such as Alverno College, have been offering a competency-based curriculum, and others, among them Charter Oaks State and Excelsior College, have been translating prior learning into college credits for students, mostly adults. Recently, Southern New Hampshire University launched the College for America, which offers a competency-based degree intended to be affordable and accessible, particularly for those who never thought they would be able to get a post-secondary education.

Today, two main forces, with support from major funders, seem to be fueling a return to competency-based learning: (1) industry and entrepreneurial education reformers and (2) higher education associations and policy organizations. The focus of the first group is mainly on providing low-cost, innovative, alternatives to the traditional educational experience to a broad range of learners. Digital badges, for example, are online mechanisms that both assess and provide credentials for learning that occurs in a range of formal and informal settings, according to the MacArthur Foundation, which is supporting Mozilla’s efforts to develop a digital badge framework that will be available to a variety of users, including colleges and businesses. Among the benefits of digital badges, supporters argue, is their potential to provide employers with detailed information about a prospective employee’s skills and performance.

A major effort to refocus on competency-based learning in traditional settings is represented by the competence-based “Degree Qualifications Profile” -- a product of a collaboration among the Lumina Foundation and several national higher education associations, including AAC&U -- which aims to help colleges and universities define and assess the outcomes of a liberal education by “describing student performance appropriate for each degree level through clear reference points that indicate the incremental and cumulative nature of learning” (1). The advantage of curriculum-based competency learning, argues Carol Schneider (2013), is that students practice complex intellectual skills across the entire educational experience. It is ongoing “practice” that distinguishes “competency” from “comprehension” alone (2).

In today’s discussion, we will explore the implications of refocusing on competency-based learning for our institutions.

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Questions to consider:

1. What are the forces driving a resurgence of competency-based learning on campuses in the region?

2. In what ways are our institutions approaching competency-based learning recently?
   a. For example, is your institution developing a policy regarding transferability of MOOCs as credit-bearing courses? If so, how will students be required to “verify” their learning?

3. Competency-based learning remains controversial in higher education for a range of reasons, including divergent points of view about what constitutes higher learning. Johann Neem (2013), for example, holds that a traditional college education is unique in that its purposes are “intellectual” and its ends achievable only through formal, “properly academic” experiences (28). Anya Kamenetz (2011), however, claims that students who have been granted credit through PLA for prior learning gained through life experience or alternative educational delivery systems have mastered the academic and personal skills and competencies expected of students in traditional settings. What are your thoughts on these rival points of view?

4. What does the future hold for our institutions with respect competency-based learning?

12:00-12:45 PM: Lunch

12:45-2:00 PM: ROUND ROBIN

In the spirit of collective sharing and reflection, we reserve time at each meeting to share new developments on our campuses and in our jobs. It is also a time to discuss personal and professional successes and challenges. The round robin is anchored in a common commitment to empathy, constructive and collegial problem solving, and support in a confidential setting.

2:00 PM: MEETING ADJOURNED

Readings:

America’s call for higher education redesign: The 2012 Lumina Foundation study of the American public’s opinion on higher education. Lumina Foundation & Gallup.


Schneider, C. G. (September 30, 2014). The proof is in the portfolio, Chronicle of Higher Education.

The Degree Qualifications Profile (January 28, 2011). Lumina Foundation.

**Excerpt:** Through this document, Lumina Foundation for Education offers a “Degree Qualifications Profile,” a tool that can help transform U.S. higher education. A Degree Profile—or qualifications framework—illustrates clearly what students should be expected to know and be able to do once they earn their degrees—at any level. This Degree Profile thus proposes specific learning outcomes that benchmark the associate, bachelor’s and master’s degrees—which constitute the great majority of postsecondary degrees awarded by U.S. colleges and universities—regardless of a student’s field of specialization.

The Degree Qualifications Profile: A user’s guide for chief academic officers. (July 21, 2011). Lumina Foundation.

**Additional Resources:**


**Abstract:** This case study examines the implementation of competency-based learning (CBL) and assessment as a measure of student professional development. Students enrolled in an industrial technology undergraduate course at a Midwestern university participated in this study. Based on the degree program outcomes, the "top five" course competencies were identified, and their key action items were assessed using an industry-based, 360-degree assessment process. Significant differences in the average initial and final assessed values were used to determine professional development gains. Findings showed that self-assessed professional gains were achieved, self-assessed results were higher than peer results, and overall peer assessments indicated aggregate gains in professional development. This case study provides a foundational framework for further research studies in competency-based learning and assessment. [ABSTRACT FROM AUTHOR]


**Excerpt:** Competency-based learning is already famously used by private institutions like Southern New Hampshire University and Western Governors University, but Wisconsin will be one of the first major public universities to take on this new, controversial form of granting degrees. Among the system's campuses, Milwaukee was first to announce bachelor's degrees in nursing, diagnostic imaging, and information science and technology, along with a certificate in professional and business communication. UW Colleges, made up of the system's two-year institutions, is developing liberal-arts-oriented associate degrees. The Flex Option, as it's often called, may cost the Wisconsin system $35-million over the next few years, with half of that recovered through tuition. The system is starting with a three-month, all-you-can-learn term for $2,250.


**Abstract:** The article discusses the importance of prior learning assessment (PLA) for the adult student market. According to Luke Dowden, director of the office of distance and electronic learning at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, PLA is an opportunity to earn credit for college level learning, and it is not credit for work experience. Dowden says that students with credit from PLA are three times more likely to complete their bachelor's degree.


**Excerpt:** I'm not trying to disparage our modal models; they work well for some students and clearly helped make public higher education more accessible. However, competency-based
models, known by lots of different names, are trying to bring personalization, flexibility, and learning-centered progression back more prominently into the mix. By building on a foundation of clear learning expectations, well-designed curricular resources and assessments, and more personally focused instructional and advising support, these models break from our now-traditional time-based progression. They adapt to a broader range of changing students with diverse learning needs, and help answer some key challenges—in particular, meeting the needs of striving older and working students.

Nicol, D. J. & MacFarlane-Dick, D. (2006). Formative assessment and self-regulated learning: A model and seven principles of good feedback practice, *Studies in Higher Education, 31*(2), 199-218. Abstract: The research on formative assessment and feedback is re-interpreted to show how these processes can help students take control of their own learning—i.e. become self-regulated learners. This reformulation is used to identify seven principles of good feedback practice that support self-regulation. A key argument is that students are already assessing their own work and generating their own feedback and that higher education should build on this ability. The research underpinning each feedback principle is presented and some examples of easy-to-implement feedback strategies are briefly described. This shift in focus, whereby students are seen as having a proactive rather than a reactive role in generating and using feedback, has profound implications for the way in which teachers organise assessments and support learning.

Shapiro, J. (February 17, 2014). Competency-based degrees: Coming soon to a campus near you, *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Excerpt: Has distance education significantly affected the business and teaching models of higher education? Certainly. Is it today’s biggest disrupter of the higher-education industry? Not quite. In fact, the greatest risk to traditional higher education as we know it may be posed by competency-based education models.

Abstract: This study investigates the effects of a competency-oriented course and the effects of feedback training on students' reflection skills. Thirty-one nursing students enrolled in a conventional course with lectures and assignments following a traditional test. Subsequently, they enrolled in a competency-oriented course, which included more performance-oriented tasks based on competencies and a performance-based assessment. In both courses, half of the students received feedback on their assignments from tutors who were trained in feedback skills (experimental group), while the other half of the students received feedback from non-trained tutors (control group). After each course, all students wrote a reflection report. Results show that students' reflection reports after the competency-oriented course were of a higher quality than the reports after the conventional course. Contrary to our expectations, the quality of the reflection reports of the control group (students supervised by non-trained tutors) was significantly higher than the quality of reflection reports of the experimental group (students supervised by trained tutors). This study shows that a competency-oriented design of courses enhances students' reflection skills, but that the training in feedback skills needs to be reconsidered. [ABSTRACT FROM AUTHOR]

Abstract: Discusses issues on competency-based learning models. Details of the international interest in competencies and measuring specific learning; Information on a report by the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education in 2000 aimed to grade student learning across the U.S.; Practical guidance to developing, implementing, or refining competency-based learning models.