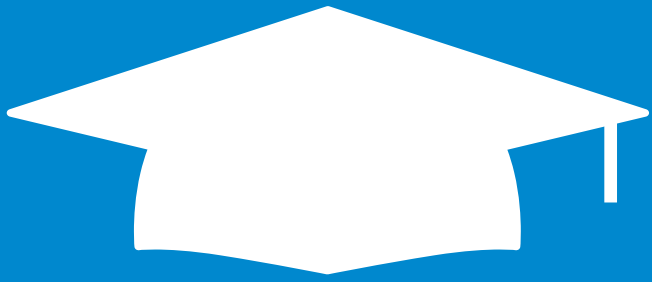




# ALL ABOUT COMPETENCY BASED EDUCATION

New learning model offers credit for  
existing knowledge and skills





# BY 2020

# 35%

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# 30%

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## AN INTRODUCTION TO COMPETENCY BASED EDUCATION

The debate has long been over about the value of a college degree: for students, a college degree is a major pathway towards professional and economic security where workers with a four-year degree, on average, will earn one million dollars more and face an unemployment rate nearly four times lower than that of non-college graduates. And for employers, access to a deep pool of college graduates is critical because a majority of future jobs will require workers with college credentials. In fact, estimates from the Federal government<sup>1</sup> show that by 2020, 35 percent of job openings will require at least a bachelor's degree, and 30 percent will require some college or an associate's degree. Obviously one of the greatest challenges we face is understanding how to help more people earn their college degrees.

For countless generations that meant sitting in a classroom for a set number of hours in order to earn credits and get a degree. But the landscape of higher education is in the midst of a revolution, transitioning away from the number of hours students spend in a classroom into a structure that allows them to demonstrate their mastery of a subject regardless of the time, place or pace of their learning. It's called competency based education (CBE) and it is changing the way people think of learning.

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## COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION 101

Competency Based Education (CBE) awards credits based on whether students can prove they have mastered competencies – the skills, abilities, and knowledge – required in an area of study. Students can work at their own pace, and the school will certify what they know and what they are able to do. If the student already has the knowledge, he or she can move on to the next set of materials.

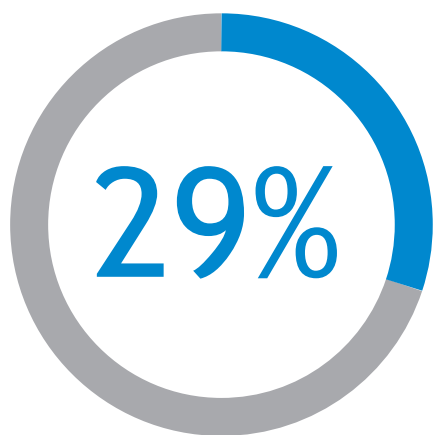
Unlike traditional postsecondary education programs that have specific lengths and credit hours, with competency based programs students take as much time as they need to complete their degree. For example, someone who has spent several years in the workforce will likely be able to demonstrate skills in their field and earn a degree faster than a student who recently graduated high school. Students can master subjects at their own pace and don't need to pay for or sit in classes if they can demonstrate that they already understand what they would otherwise be learning in the class. In addition, students can benefit from learning opportunities outside of the classroom.

Even better, students can save time and money, not an insignificant point when the College Board estimates that the cost of tuition fees and room and board for the 2013-2014 school year was \$18,391 for a public four-year school and \$40,917 at private schools. Using CBE, instead of the student sitting in two classes for a semester, he or she could potentially demonstrate a year's worth of learning in the same amount of time. In addition, unlike most traditional college tuition which is paid per credit hour, competency-based programs are not credit hour based and usually charge a flat rate over a set period of time, such as every six months. Students only pay tuition for the time it takes them to complete the program which can be an incentive for many students to work harder, since the faster they progress the less it costs in the end.

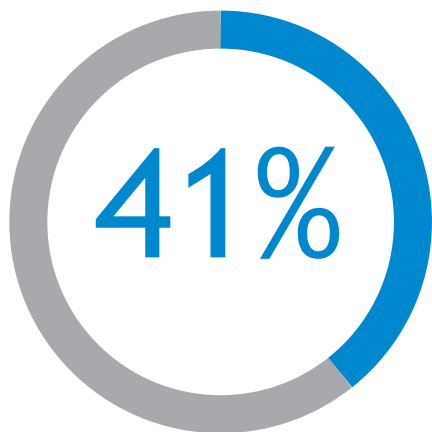


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1/3 of college students are over the age of 25

Another compelling feature of CBE is that it is a reliable certification of knowledge that a student can actually demonstrate, which, in turn, does a better job of communicating a graduate's value and skill set to employers. For example, an employer evaluating a potential employee who holds a college degree in philosophy doesn't have a clear idea of the specific knowledge and skills the employee would bring to the employer. The degree really only indicates that a student has passed a certain number of classes.

Competency based education is exactly the opposite. It only evaluates the knowledge the student has, not how the student obtained the knowledge or how long it took. With documented competencies, employers will know that the employee they plan to hire is career-ready and has the skills and knowledge necessary to perform well in his or her new position.

## PERFECT FOR THE BUSY ADULT LEARNER

Competency based education could also be the key to helping one of the largest segments of today's student population: adult college students. According to the Department of Education's (DOE) National Center for Education Statistics, of today's 18 million undergraduates, only 29 percent<sup>2</sup> are traditional learners who attend college full-time right out of high school. According to the DOE, between 2000 and 2011, the percentage of students age 25 and older enrolled in college rose more than 41 percent<sup>3</sup>, and today more than one third of college students are over the age of 25.

These older students bring a different set of both qualities and challenges: typically they already have knowledge and skills that they have developed either on the job, in the military or in other settings outside of the classroom. At the same time, they are also frequently managing home, life and career demands, which means that attending classes full-time is difficult if not completely impossible. However, with most competency-based programs, students have the flexibility to learn where they want and when they

WITH MOST COMPETENCY-BASED PROGRAMS, STUDENTS HAVE THE FLEXIBILITY TO LEARN WHERE THEY WANT AND WHEN THEY WANT, ALLOWING THEM TO ACHIEVE A COLLEGE EDUCATION WITHOUT SACRIFICING THEIR JOBS AND FAMILY LIVES.



want, allowing them to achieve a college education without sacrificing their jobs and family lives.

## RETHINKING HIGHER EDUCATION

The move toward embracing CBE continues to grow as numbers of higher education officials and legislators across the country continue to support it as an option for students pursuing a degree. President Obama praised CBE in his August 2013 speech on affordability in higher education, and the Governors in Indiana, Texas and Wisconsin have also supported competency-based approaches in postsecondary education. According to *Inside Higher Ed*<sup>4</sup>, more than 350 institutions now offer or are seeking to create competency based degrees.

The steps taken to move beyond the credit hour framework are also helping colleges rethink higher education in terms of efficiency, effectiveness and fairness. They are more efficient in that they are focused on how best to help students demonstrate competence, even if it means eliminating redundant coursework or unnecessary degree requirements. They are more effective in that they develop methods to validate that student learning has occurred and competencies have been achieved, rather than merely assuming that such learning has taken place if a student has taken a certain number of courses. They are fairer because they recognize learning that the student may have acquired outside of a classroom. Learning is what counts, not the time spent in a classroom.

There are important questions still to be worked out, including standards of best practice, agreed upon definitions of competencies and their value. In addition, because most student federal aid programs are based on credit hours, and because CBE typically is not credit-hour based, there are other questions that need to be addressed to



AT THE URGING OF THE WHITE HOUSE AND MEMBERS OF BOTH POLITICAL PARTIES, DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION OFFICIALS ARE WORKING WITH SCHOOLS INTERESTED IN OFFERING COMPETENCY BASED EDUCATION TO EVALUATE HOW THESE PROGRAMS SHOULD BE IMPLEMENTED WHILE STILL MAINTAINING THE HIGHEST STANDARDS AND INTEGRITY OF THE DEGREE.

ensure that all students have access to the programs.

Current federal student aid funding can be traced back to 1893 when Charles Eliot, president of Harvard, introduced to the National Education Association the credit hour which became the basic unit of a college education. To be accredited, universities have had to base curriculums on credit hours and years of study. And today, in order for students to receive need-based Pell grants or federal loans, they must carry a certain load of credits each semester.

Competency Based Education, however, is based on actual learning, not credit hours. At the urging of the White House and members of both political parties, Department of Education officials are working with schools interested in offering competency based education to evaluate how these programs should be implemented while still maintaining the highest standards and integrity of the degree.

They are also working to identify how to help students earn federal student aid based on how much they learn – rather than the amount of time they spend in class—by providing federal aid to students enrolled in self-paced competency based education programs. One key could be the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act (HEA) which is currently before Congress. The reauthorization of the HEA is an exciting opportunity to move federal financial aid away from credit based learning so it can include knowledge-based initiatives like CBE to ensure all students have access to financial assistance.

## SEIZING THE OPPORTUNITY

While there are certainly challenges ahead, there is much to be excited about. It could be the solution that offers anyone who wants to pursue a college degree the opportunity to do so. The potential promise the model offers is to help people earn their degree faster and cheaper by trading upon the skills





and knowledge they already have. It could be the key to a new era of prosperity and success that previously may have seemed out of reach to them.

It is an exciting opportunity not only for these students, but also for all of us. It reignites the debate about how to best create meaningful solutions to ensure we have well-trained workers ready to meet the demands of the coming decades. Programs that help people earn their degree are the key to keeping our country competitive globally and ensuring our nation's future. We look forward to being part of the debate about how to best utilize this exciting new model of learning.

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<sup>1</sup>White House Fact Sheet: "White House Unveils America's College Promise Proposal: Tuition Free Community College for Responsible Students," January 9, 2015.

<sup>2</sup>Wall Street Journal, "Number of the Week: 'Non-Traditional' Students are Majority on College Campuses," Ben Casselman, July 6, 2013.

<sup>3</sup>National Center for Education Statistics: Fast Facts, Enrollment.

<sup>4</sup>Inside Higher Ed "Experimenting with Aid," Paul Fain, July 23, 2014.



The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) is widely recognized as the national best practices leader in connecting learning to work through learning assessment, credit for prior learning, career mapping, learning and career advising, research, dissemination and more.

CAEL is a 501(c) non-profit, international organization with 40 years of experience in workforce learning, including 30 years of experience working directly with employers to create and deliver effective talent management solutions.

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