
Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions

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Regional Accreditors Announce Common Framework for Defining and Approving Competency-Based Education Programs

Middle States
Commission
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Commission on
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Education, New
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of Schools and
Colleges
CIHE, NEASC

Higher Learning
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HLC

Northwest Commission
on Colleges and
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NWCCU

Southern Association
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Schools
Commission on
Colleges
SACSCOC

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ACCJC/WASC

WASC Senior College
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WSCUC

Washington, DC –The Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions (C-RAC) today released a joint statement outlining the criteria that accreditors will use in defining and approving competency-based education (CBE) programs.

“As accreditors, we have seen growing interest among institutions in developing competency-based education, including programs that use a direct assessment approach. However, there has been limited guidance to help institutions better understand the expectations for these programs, including for purposes of eligibility to participate in federal student aid programs.” said Barbara Brittingham, Chair of C-RAC and President of the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education, NEASC.

In addition, C-RAC understands that the Department of Education will soon release guidance, focused on CBE, for institutions seeking to participate in the recently announced “experimental sites” program. “This alignment and new level of collaboration are welcome signs and are good for all those involved – most importantly the many students who will benefit from the expansion of these new opportunities,” said Paul LeBlanc, President of Southern New Hampshire University and a member of the Steering Committee of C-BEN, the Competency-Based Education Network.

Although CBE is not new, enhanced interest has been propelled by increased expectations that college graduates meet the skill needs of employers and by the increasing capacity of institutions to assess student learning. “The key is to promote this expansion of CBE while also ensuring the quality and integrity of the academic program. Between our statement and the new guidance from the Department of Education, we believe these goals can be accomplished, thereby supporting increased innovation at our member institutions,” added Brittingham.

A copy of C-RAC’s statement follows.

Statement of the Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions (C-RAC)

Framework for Competency-Based Education

The seven regional accrediting commissions share a common understanding of terms used to define competency-based education and competency-based education's most recent application in programs that use direct assessment as the means of measuring and recognizing 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, they primarily emphasize what students can do with their knowledge. Students progress through degree or credential programs by demonstrating competencies specified at the course and/or program level. The curriculum is structured around these 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 comprised of 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 they 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 U.S. 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 both 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

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

grades are not assigned and no term length is imposed, the transcript reflects competencies attained rather than grades or credit hours earned. 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.

Accreditors will expect institutions, in establishing credit-hour equivalencies, to:

1. Draw upon their previously defined policies for the credit hour (consistent with federal regulation); and
2. Focus on the amount of learning that has occurred rather than 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 a 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 then provide guidance about the submission of future CBE programs for approval. An accreditor will consider a program 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 is required to demonstrate mastery of every competency in a course to earn credit for such course.

Direct assessment programs: Because a degree/credential is awarded only on the basis of the attainment of competencies and not on the award of credit, per federal regulations, direct assessment programs must be approved by the accreditor. 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, the federal regulations require accreditors 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. Whether the institution demonstrates the capacity to offer competency-based or direct assessment programs, including administrative capacity and significant expertise in assessment that will ensure the reliability and validity of the assessments.
2. Whether most of the proposed learning outcomes emphasize performance, not simply knowledge.
3. Whether proposed competencies are externally referenced (e.g., referenced by convened groups of employers, professional advisory committees, or licensure requirements).
4. Whether the institution ensures “regular and substantive interaction” with faculty, as defined by the Department of Education, and appropriate services for students.
5. Whether the institution demonstrates that the competencies for a degree cohere to the claims that the institution makes for the qualifications of graduates, including at the undergraduate level those qualifications traditionally associated with general education and the major or concentration.
6. Whether 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. Whether a student must demonstrate each relevant 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 and has multiple forms or prompts for each competency).
10. Whether a high proportion of the proposed competencies represent authentic demonstrations.
11. Whether 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).

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