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PROGRAM PLANNING AND DESIGN

## Launching a Unique Competency-Based Offering at a Community College (Part 2)

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*In an industry that has a tendency to get swept up by trends and fads, competency-based education (CBE) has proved its value time and again over a matter of decades. Over the past few years we've seen the number of CBE offerings skyrocket, matching the public's focus on student outcomes and skill mastery. In this two-part interview, John Milam reflects on the process of launching a unique CBE program that ties in open education resources (OER) at Lord Fairfax Community College (LFCC). In the first installment, he discussed the thinking behind—and the roadblocks facing—the HigherEd.org portal. In this conclusion, he shares his thoughts on its place in the market.*

**The EvoLLLution (Evo):** What are a few of the differences between managing an open-ended, direct-assessment program like those supported by HigherEd.org and managing a more traditional postsecondary program?

**John Milam (JM):** Using CBE has been a learning curve, but one faculty were prepared for since competencies are

already being used in the career and technical education fields of IT, administrative support technology, and health information management. The real challenge has been in doing direct assessment. This relies totally on the assessment of student learning in lieu of credit or clock hours. Getting rid of courses as the only mindset for instruction has challenged some fundamental assumptions.

As part of the Virginia Community College System (VCCS), we use the same student information system (SIS) and don't have control over how students register or how they pay tuition and fees. The VCCS has worked with us to help adapt to CBE, but there's a ways to go and constraints because of how the SIS works. So while we don't think about teaching competencies in terms of courses and credit hours, we still have to use classes for registration and payment. And while regional accreditation and the Department of Education are strict about adhering to the definition of direct assessment as not being time based, CBE learning still has to be documented in terms of course credit equivalencies with extended and traditional transcripts in order to be

good stewards of scarce financial aid resources. This makes sure that student CBE learning doesn't get lost if students withdraw or transfer to non-CBE programs, also in transferring from two-year CBE to four-year traditional programs.

Faculty roles, use of the LMS for competencies instead of course objectives, and generating special competency-based transcripts have required a lot of rethinking. We built our program to include what we call weekly momentum points and three semester milestones to make sure that there was regular and substantive interaction between program faculty and students. Once we looked at how our faculty were working with students, it was clear that we were doing everything that the Department of Education wants us to regarding this.

**Evo:** Over the long term, how do you hope to see HigherEd.org (specifically), and open-access direct-assessment programs (more generally) evolve?

**JM:** We'd love to see HigherEd.org go viral and been seen as the best educational search engine and the place to go on the web for personalized learning with competencies and OER. We'd like to bring in more assessments and badges, as well as other types of credentials that are mapped to the competency frameworks. We're just starting a pilot project to map military job codes in HIM to the AHIMA competency framework, with ACE, CAEL, the Badge Alliance, UMUC, AHIMA, and others as partners.

Sustainability is something we are thinking about all the time, looking for sponsors, advertising, co-branding, and affiliate sales on the portal. We include courses, OER, and digital learning resources from providers and want other colleges to share their course catalogs with us. For example, we've just added resources from the Microsoft Virtual Academy as part of our partnership with Microsoft and we've been invited to partner and are beginning onboarding with Amazon Education. Two associations with national competency frameworks, AHIMA and IAAP, are key contributors. There is a limited bandwidth of disciplines and industries the portal serves now and we'd like to expand that dramatically with other career and technical education fields such as supervision, nursing, allied health, and engineering. Our early childhood education faculty would like to create a CBE version of that program. The AHIMA Foundation's Executive Director Bill Rudman is helping to lead the way nationally, promoting a new competency model for employability skills, and we want the portal to promote these competencies as their roll out, linking OER and credentials to them.

Most of the direct assessment CBE programs we've seen in C-BEN are relatively small. Other leading institutions like SNHU enroll industry partners instead of individual students, which is our approach, though we'd like to tap into HIM training needs for healthcare and the insurance industry. We picked our programs in IT, cyber security, networking, and health information management because

we thought they'd take off. LFCC's designation as an NSA and Homeland Security Agency Center of Excellence should help.

Right now, CBE is new to the region we serve and to our employer partners. So people aren't necessarily as excited about direct assessment CBE as we are. We've had some great support from the Governor of Virginia and his initiatives for workforce development. We think that open-access direct assessment CBE is at the heart of what the presidential campaigns are talking about with their vision for free higher education. If we can get them to look at the portal and what DOL has been trying to do with the TAACCCT grants and ED with direct assessment, I think it will go a long way to helping these kinds of programs evolve. Thanks for the questions and for helping us get the word out about what's happening in this space.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

Competency-based programs allow community colleges to go above and beyond in meeting the expectations of two groups of key stakeholders: students and local employers.

By aligning with the work of major professional associations, institutions can ensure their competency-based programs get the recognition and support from the labor market that they need.

The EvoLLLution is an online newspaper dedicated to non-traditional higher education. It is the brainchild of [Destiny Solutions](#), a company that enables postsecondary institutions to deliver world-class customer service, grow enrollments and capture new markets while increasing operational efficiency.

**Knowledge to Work (K2W):**

## **A Portal for Competencies and Individualized Learning**

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