

Transcription for

EP. 29: NEXT STEPS FOR COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION

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THE KEY INSIDE HIGHER ED

EP. 29: NEXT STEPS FOR COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION

CHARLA LONG

DICK SENESE

PAUL FAIN

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PAUL FAIN: Welcome to The Key with IHE. I'm Paul Fain, the host and a contributing editor with Inside Higher Ed. During this episode we'll be talking about competency-based learning or education. This delivery method has grown over the last decade, although not at the rate many predicted. But some experts think CBE and the reliance on competencies could become more common during the pandemic and recession. To get a sense of the CBE landscape, we spoke with Charla Long, the executive director of the Competency-Based Education Network or C-BEN, a national consortium of colleges and systems that work on competency-based learning. Long talked about the outlook for CBE and what has prevented some colleges from taking the leap.

CHARLA LONG: So when I think about barriers, it's amazing how much we desire to be perfect before we launch. We are paralyzed by perfection some times. It's the reason a pilot, right? So I think the difference between institutions that have had the courage and commitment to launch a CBE effort said, I'm not going to get it right from out of the gate. It's okay to fail.

PAUL FAIN: I also spoke with Dick Senese, the president of Capella University. Senese talked about Capella's long history with competencies and how it was one of the first to offer direct assessment, a more aggressive form of CBE.

DICK SENESE: With the opportunity to take advantage of direct assessment as an approach, which actually began in the Obama Administration, we developed what we now call FlexPath, this way that

learners are able to have a more flexible program and continue to be able to weave their education into their lives, because working adults have complex lives, and certainly more complex in 2020 than any of us would have imagined.

PAUL FAIN: A quick note about this episode... It's sponsored by Strategic Education Inc., which is Capella's parent company. Since the episode features Capella's president, I wanted to let you all know SEI is the sponsor. All right, let's get to the conversation.

Charla Long, very good to see you.

CHARLA LONG: Likewise, Paul, it's good to be here.

PAUL FAIN: I know you have a lot going on and we can talk about that later, busy week, so doubly appreciate you taking time to talk about the state of competency-based learning, so something we've talked about for a long time. Can you give us a sense of where things stand right now in this wild moment?

CHARLA LONG: Yeah, it would be great to know where things stand right now, right? I can tell you going into the pandemic, we were seeing really slow but steady growth. The latest survey, national survey of CBE programs showed us still around the 600 mark, about 25% of community colleges being adopters. But post pandemic, I think we're seeing big lifts right now. This conference, CBE Exchange, that we're at this week we're certainly seeing institutions that have never been in the mix before attending. We're seeing institutions send two or three people to learn more about what CBE is. So I do think as a result of the pandemic, people are saying, you know, we've moved to online or we've moved to remote learning, I might say. But could CBE be part of a solution that would really allow us to rethink higher education post pandemic? That's what we're seeing at the moment.

PAUL FAIN: And could you talk about some of the reasons that might be? I've certainly heard some, there's going to be a lot of swirl out there, probably increased interest in short-term credentials, if not enrollment right now. What are some of the benefits that you see really being more attractive to folks right now?

CHARLA LONG: So one is, I think those institutions that have CBE programs saw that when the pandemic

hit, people just, their programs continued as-is and they continued to grow. They didn't struggle like non-CBE programs were really struggling to figure out how do I even do remote learning. What does that even look like? How do I teach in this kind of environment? So CBE programs really didn't get impacted by the pandemic. So I think that's one reason why people have this interest.

Second is, you're right. We have a lot of Americans that are out of work, that are underemployed, that have had to take opportunities in less than desirable locations and in roles just so that they could maintain some economic stability. Those individuals are saying, retool me, reskill me, help me get back into a work-based context that I can really grow and thrive. I think competency-based education, focusing on what are the competencies, what are those knowledge skill, abilities, intellectual behaviors that are really needed to today's post pandemic marketplace is absolutely essential. And CBE programs, and competency-based learning approaches are really poised to help those folks that find themselves unemployed or underemployed get back into the right kind of employment opportunities.

So I think that's another reason you're right about smaller credentials, give me what I need right now, so I can get food on the table and I can pay my electric bill, absolutely is a concern. But I would say, in the process, it's absolutely critical that we don't leave behind some learners in the process.

And I think early data is already showing we've got some inequities that are happening as a result of the shifts that occurred during the pandemic. We want to be really careful that we're addressing those now and making sure that any solutions we build going out from this moment in time are bringing all learners along, right? And so I think CBE programs offer an approach that can lead to much more equitable outcomes. We see that at programs that have CBE offerings today. They're seeing a lot better results from an equity standpoint. And so we want to really embrace that, run that out throughout the US for sure.

PAUL FAIN: I have some understanding of why, from an equity concern standpoint, you have a disproportionate impact of the pandemic economically and in other ways on Black, Latino, and lower-income students, who may be leaving higher ed in large numbers, which is a big problem. I can see the benefits of competency-based learning in that it provides more flexibility and encourages folks with what they know and can do. Can you talk a little about what you see the benefits in terms an equity frame?

CHARLA LONG: CBE programs are really intentionally designed to say, how do we acknowledge what the student knows and can do? How do we talk to that learner, connect with that learner based on their

unique position, right? So how do I serve this particular learner? What are their needs? How do I wrap the support services around them to help them stay what I call sticky? How do I increase the stickiness so that they'll persist with me until completion of that credential.

People long to be in relationship, people long to be known. And so in CBE programs, we're developing those deep relationships, thinking about, what is it this particular learner needs in order to successful, and then giving them what they need, right? So when we think about they need a mobile Wi-Fi access. They just need an iPad. They could really use a... Whatever their needs are, let's help get that for them so they can continue in their educational journey. So one is the wrap-around student support services.

One is the approach of personalization, acknowledging what a person brings to the table. One is being able to really focus on what I am teaching you, you can translate today into a work context, into an employment context. You're developing those knowledge and skills that employers want and need. Yeah, I think those are some of the key areas. I would say that in a couple of days of CBE Exchange you'll see an announcement that's made that's really around this focus on how do we help more institutions build CBE programs for equitable outcomes. So I'm sure you'll be seeing something about that in a couple of days as well and our commitment in that area.

PAUL FAIN: Definitely be watching that. Thank you for the heads-up. You know, employers, big employers on big national stages in particular have been talking about skills-based hiring for a while, before the pandemic. And, you know, the focus more on competencies than necessarily credentials. It hasn't always happened at the HR level. Do you see this moment breaking things loose a bit for employers in terms of competency-based learning and hiring?

CHARLA LONG: Yeah, I hope so. I mean, certainly they're looked across their organizations. Some have had to do major furloughs. Who do we bring back? Who are we going to have to permanently lay off? Where are we changing our business model? I mean, you think of the industries that have been significantly impacted--retail, hospitality. I mean, even here in Tennessee, which is where I'm based, certainly in the South, many of our businesses are open, but they're still at limited capacity. Our staffs are down. How do I make a decision about what are the new competencies that we need in our workforce?

I think we will see more and more employers move to skills-based hiring. And for the employers listening, I hope they hear me say, and I need you to say to your institutional partners and I need you to tell me what are the skills you're actually preparing learners to be able to demonstrate when they earn a

credential, right? So if they're going to move to skills-based hiring, I also need them to be conveying that, right, to the institutional partners that they work with so they too can transition to skills-based or knowledge skills, those competency-based learning models as well. I think it takes employers conveying that clearly on the higher ed side that we need you to do this in order for me to be able to get our economic engine going again.

PAUL FAIN: Let's talk for a minute about the Tower of Babel challenge with competencies. You know...

CHARLA LONG: There's a Tower of Babel? Just kidding... [LAUGHTER]

PAUL FAIN: Yeah, a question that's just been there for a long time, but if Arizona State is trying to define competencies right now, a bunch of major providers are trying to have a say in helping kind of set the table for a broader expansion of competency-based learning. Do you see positional there, whether, you know, state level, system level, real progress could be made to help institutions by giving a bit more of a standard template?

CHARLA LONG: Absolutely. I think we'll see it not just in the language around what the competencies are. So you look at the work of Open Skill Network, for example, and others, that are trying to create these rich skill-descriptors that institutions can use. When we align around language, we now have something in common that we can exchange, right? So we often say competency is currency. Well, we all know what a dollar bill is and what a dollar bill can buy you. But what I call communication and what I can communication, or what I call critical thinking, you call problem-solving and decision-making. And we have a hard time exchanging it, because we don't use the same language. So I applaud those that are doing that.

I hope that people will not do that in silo and for self-promotion purposes, but instead will do that with good of the movement in mind. I hope we can engage in those conversations as well, to think about what is it that all institutions need, what is it that our employers need to do, that great work with the US Chamber and others, I mean, to really try to craft the language, absolutely essential.

I think competency language is only part of that. That next piece to tackle will be how do we assess that. What does the performance of that look like? When we start to align around what successful performance looks like, now you eliminate really the need for an A, B, C, or D. It's really about did you have performance and at what level can you perform that particular competency? Now we're getting to

the kind of new model that we can get really excited about. But you're right. Got to share common language. It's one of the key features.

PAUL FAIN: Thanks for indulging that. You know, looking forward, it's hard to do these days, I think every day we're learning more about the future, but there's a lot of uncertainty. Can you talk about some of the barriers that concern you that might prevent CBE from scaling up to the next level, or even some of the incentives you'd like to see to help you get there?

CHARLA LONG: Yeah. So when I think about barriers, it's amazing how much we desire to be perfect before we launch. We are paralyzed by perfection sometimes. It's the reason for a pilot, right? So I think the difference between institutions that have had the courage and commitment to launch a CBE effort said, I'm not going to get it right from out of the gate. It's okay to fail. I mean, I've talked to a university president recently who's on version number 3 of a CBE program. That's good, right? They acknowledge we went way too this way, and now we're way too...we got to go right back, you know... And so that's what it's about, but I think being paralyzed by this need to get it perfect and right is causing a lot of institutions not to start. So get a model out there that you think is 80 percent there, refine it, listen to your learners, consider it as a continuous improvement process. So I would say that's one.

Then second, one of the things that we've seen that's been very helpful at energizing the movement is the CARES Act money, to be honest. Institutions have had some money to spend and they've said, you know, tuition may be down but we ought to be thinking about the future. And I have several, many, many, many institutions who have said, can we use that and get some instructional design? Can you use that and help us think through what a CBE strategy would be?

I mean, we, look at state systems that are putting together full strategies around how they want to do CBE in their state. California Community College chancellor's office working through the summer in the middle of the pandemic to say, what can we do to achieve more equitable outcomes using CBE as the solution? They're working on a state-wide strategy. In Kentucky, the Kentucky Community and Technical College System is looking at what all 16 institutions could do if they could just align to the most needed work force knowledge and skills and abilities, and have that alignment in their general education, their technical education, and their workforce solutions program.

Why be in three silos? What if we could unite across that common language, that Babel comment that you made earlier, what if we united across some common language? Would it help us? Could we offer a CBE solution? Could it lead to better outcomes for our learners, more equitable outcomes?

And so I think we're seeing an interesting movement, a movement that ought to be watched at these state levels of saying, we've seen it demonstrated at an institutional level. What would this look like if we brought it up and across a whole system? We've seeing a lot of movement that way. I'd encourage our regulators, our lawmakers, our philanthropy organizations, help us out. Think about how you can fund and help support that kind of innovation, whether that's through a demonstration project and some funding to help there, whether that is in, you know, some of the kind of stimulus funding or other funding to help recover from the pandemic. Tie that to making sure that you're developing programs that lead to the knowledge and skills and abilities that we need to drive the American economy forward. I think we'll continue to see significant growth in CBE.

PAUL FAIN: Well, Charla, you've done a phenomenal job setting the table in a fascinating time for this field, so I hope we can keep in touch, and I want to thank you for the access today and over the years. You know, for listeners who don't know, when you let me kind of watch a CBE program in person at Lipscomb University several years back, it really clicked for me, really showed the potential here. So thank you so much.

CHARLA LONG: And I would just say to Paul, you've been a real blessing to the field and to competency-based education. You're one of those rare people who dug in enough to get to understand it and not make judgments about it until you actually saw it, and you saw how it worked and the lives it changed. And so I'm forever grateful for you taking the time, and the movement is thankful for you and the time you've spent really understanding it. So thanks for letting me be here with you today, Paul.

PAUL FAIN: Thanks, Charla. That means a lot. I appreciate it.

PAUL FAIN: If you're looking to go even more in depth in IHE's news coverage, check out our special reports. These deep-dives feature rich data and reporting, as well as thoughtful, substantive analysis you can trust. Visit [insidehighered.com/special-reports](https://insidehighered.com/special-reports), to view the topics we've covered and to purchase the report that best supports your area of work or study.

I'm speaking with Dick Senese. Dick, how are you?

DICK SENESE: I'm doing well. How are you, Paul?



PAUL FAIN: I'm doing well. Thanks for making time for me. I know Capella is hardly new to competency-based learning. You all created a framework for all of your courses, I believe, as being competency-based long ago. Can you talk a little bit about that approach and how it got you to this moment?

DICK SENESE: Sure, of course. You know, Capella University as you mentioned uses a competency-based curriculum model. And that really is at the core of our mission, right, to offer high-quality programs for working adults who are seeking to advance on their career. So competency is that combination of knowledge, skills, and professions dispositions that are required in a job setting, in a professional setting. And so we use backwards design for all of our curriculum design and have for many, many years.

With the opportunity to take advantage of direct assessment as an approach, which actually began in the Obama Administration, we developed what we now call FlexPath, this way that learners are able to have a more flexible program and continue to be able to weave their education into their lives, because working adults have complex lives, and certainly more complex in 2020 than any of us would have imagined.

PAUL FAIN: Certainly, from the beginning, it felt like direct assessment was revolutionary in a lot of ways, not easy to do, I know, for a lot of reasons. With the exception of Capella and a few others, and CBE more broadly, not just direct assessment, obviously, Western Governors, the growth hasn't been huge. You know, it's been steady and good, but you all are at the forefront. Can you talk about why that is, why it's taken a while for the field to kind of get where you are?

DICK SENESE: Sure, while, it's hard to speculate about every other institution of higher ed, right? At the same time, we know that higher ed can be very tradition-bound, right? But yet innovators have developed, Capella University among them, and shown a path to offer programs like FlexPath. I think if the pandemic has taught institutions of higher education, including Capella, how to even be more flexible, more innovative, I can't imagine what else has. You know, the rapid shift everyone had to do. So I'm hoping that as people look to innovation and look to programming, more and more people will discover, and more and more institutions will discover, ways to offer flexibility for their learners through direct assessment program.

PAUL FAIN: I'm curious about the students who've been attracted to FlexPath, who they tend to be,

what sort of programs they're interested in. I know you all have pretty good outcomes too, so if you could give us just a flavor of how it's worked for students.

DICK SENESE: Yeah, so the learners that have come into FlexPath, and we ask some of those same questions, right? So we did a really robust study over, looking at a [UNCLEAR] over 2013 to 2018. Now, of course, this just applies for the typical FlexPath student, but, but you know, we've seen higher two year persistence rates, almost 25 percent higher persistence rates. We've seen people move more quickly through bachelor's programs and master's programs. So, you know, slightly more than half of the people in the bachelor's program moved more quickly than their traditional program counterparts, about 40 percent of the master's.

And that's an important thing, because I think everyone thought when direct assessment really got going, everyone's going to move faster. The truth is it helps people fit it into their lives, right? You're a busy working nurse, for example, and you maybe aspire to be a nurse leader and you're going for your MSN. Suddenly, you know, with COVID, you need to take a little time off, maybe you need to go a little slower. Or you have a family obligation, even in the pre-COVID days, right? You have family, community obligations. So what it really does is it gives people control over their educational timeline and flexibility in a way that no other program in higher education can do. And, you know, students and learners of all kinds need that more now than ever.

PAUL FAIN: You know, I hear you on the time where everybody was focused on early completers, and one of the questions that I love to ask people is, you know, how does your program cope with a student who's really struggling. And this is mastery, there's no agreement subpar grade and move on. And how has Capella treated that question over the years?

DICK SENESE: Yeah. So, you know, this is an educational program, so there are faculty, there are faculty qualified tutors, there are all the other academic support resources available to students in our FlexPath program to contact the reference librarian, to reach out to faculty members, that faculty reach out to them. So all of that is happening, but it's happening on the schedule of the learner, not on the schedule of the institution, within broad parameters, right? There are these 12-week subscription periods and that sort of thing, so it's not an unlimited scheduling opportunity. But all the support resources are available. And, of course, there are faculty who are actively involved with our learners.

PAUL FAIN: I certainly get the enhanced need for flexibility. That's kind of a delicate way of putting it. As any parent knows, these are hard times for scheduling. Beyond that, though, you know, we've seen the

numbers of the uncertainty and anxiety students, or potential college students face is the barrier right now, even more than finances, which is kind of stunning. How does CBE play into that? I mean, I can see some reasons why it would be attractive and that it really looks at what you know and can do.

DICK SENESE: Well, that's a really important point, right? Competency-based education starts with what is required for someone with that credential in the professional workspace to be able to do. What should they know? What should their professional dispositions be? And a high-quality CBE program uses backwards design to weave those competencies into what become called courses. You know, when I taught at a traditional liberal arts college or public schools that I've taught at, the course content was content-based. It was whatever I wanted to teach, in a way, what was my area of expertise.

Here in a competency-based program, we have an interwoven set of competencies that align directly to the profession, right? And that, I think, helps learners gain the assurance that they're learning the right things, that it's professionally relevant. We do a lot of different things to ensure that we maintain the professional relevancy, the currency. Some fields change rapidly. My own field of psychology changes rapidly. So we have to keep those things current. And that's why people, I think, when they're looking at programs, those are the kinds of questions they should ask of CBE programs.

PAUL FAIN: As we grapple as a nation with the economic turbulence and its disproportionate impact on Black and Latino and low-income folks, is there added urgency to help institutions across their boundaries do more to standardize them? I know that's a dangerous term, but given how hard it is in some cases to use the same language with employers or with different employers and different institutions. Do you see any changes afoot there?

DICK SENESE: Well, I think there's at least two sides, or maybe probably more, to what you're talking about. One certainly is affordability as well. So programs in direct assessment can be much more affordable, certainly at Capella they are. When we did our study, we found that, you know, the tuition that we ended charging learners was like almost 60 percent less, 59 percent less on average. And the financial aid they used was much less as well. So that's a really important element too.

I think, you know, institutions need to be true to their mission. They need to find that which they want to make a mark with. In Capella's case, we're making that mark for focusing on competencies, by focusing on working adults. I know there's a great conversation, and we should talk about this next time maybe, within higher education about transfer and about higher learning assessment. And I know CAEL and ACE have both convened taskforces. I'm on the ACE taskforce, American Council on Education, on

transfer credit. We'll have a report coming out over the next couple of months about these very questions. But I think having competency-based education really helps ensure this alignment to the profession. That's super-important.

PAUL FAIN: Prior learning assessment was another area ten years ago where we thought in that last recession that it was really going to go gangbusters. It didn't as much as a lot of people hoped, in different ways and different reasons in CBE. And again, I don't want to be dumping cold water on an innovation that's doing quite well. So, you know, looking forward, a lot of uncertainty, maybe less every day, who knows. But what are some of the milestones we should be looking for with Capella and FlexPath in the next year or two?

DICK SENESE: Well, you know, we recently launched our first doctoral program in FlexPath, a doctor of nursing practice. We're really excited about that, continuing to help support nursing and health sciences as they need additional profession education for people to advance, working with a host of partners across that industry. I think you'll continue to see, you know, other innovations into fast-growing areas, that's what we always want to look for professionally. Where can we help people move in their profession, gain socio-economic status, and have a manageable cost to it all, both in terms of time and money. So we continue to scan for those things.

I think more and more you're going to see institutions look to innovate. I think the notion that higher ed can't be innovative I think is being disproven across the board by reactions to COVID. And I hope that more and more institutions of higher ed will look to innovations that really provide a high quality education, but really do it from the perspective of how can this help the learner with their goals and fit into their life. You know, you can't fool demographics, right? And more and more people who are going to be approaching higher ed looking for a credential of any kind, certificate, a short-term credential, or a degree or even a doctoral program, doctoral degree, are really going to be working adults. You know, they're going to be starting in a career and they're going to want to advance in that career, and that's really where Capella University has its focus.

PAUL FAIN: What do you think the potential for short-term credentials might be? I know there's a lot of variables here, but we're hearing more interest in them, if not necessarily enrollment trends yet. And, you know, I just wonder about how that fits with the CBE question looking forward as well.

DICK SENESE: While, I think, you know, the broad end to your point is CBE can be used in any type of program, short-term program, any subject matter, any degree level. I would expect that in certain fields

short-term programs will become more prominent as upscaling and as knowledge turns over faster and faster in some areas than in others. And it's really, I think, when employers start to create more demand for those, then you'll see more supply, right? It's ultimately this kind of supply and demand question about what are the signals employers are looking for in order to hire the right person. And I think you see this because more and more employers are helping their employees go back to school, whether that's for short-term credential or a full degree.

PAUL FAIN: You know, that's a great point and, you know, I've been in quite a few conversations with employers or workforce-oriented folks over the years who say they love competencies, certainly at the C-suite level, but it doesn't always translate, as you know. Do you see that dynamic shifting, because it sure feels like it, at least right now in terms of really large employers getting more and more engaged to more urgent here?

DICK SENESE: I think that will continue to be the case, where more and more employers at all levels of the organization start to understand the value of using competency frameworks to understand job qualifications, to really understand what are the important things for someone to have to bring to any position. And again, that's the interface between education and employment, right, where in order to be, to provide the shortest distance between education and employment, having a well articulated competency framework within the educational program that aligns to profession, that uses authentic assessment, which asks to essentially perform similar tasks to what you might do in your job, and that's what it is that you're being assessed on by faculty. Those are the kinds of programs that increasingly as people learn about them, they increasingly have greater confidence in them.

PAUL FAIN: As you know well, a wide industry transformation to competencies as the currency would be a very big change in higher education. What do you see as being some of the keys to that happening in the next few years? Any kind of, whether it's incentives or barriers that need to come down, what are you looking at?

DICK SENESE: Well, I think for, you know, in higher education, I don't know that we want a single model everywhere, right? Different institutions have unique missions, unique traditions, unique histories, and we need to let them be who are they are. For institutions like Capella that are focused on helping working adults, I think competency-based education makes all the sense in the world, because it provides that direct link between education and employment. For some institutions may have particular programs that are competency-based and others that aren't for really solid reasons. And I think that's part of the diversity of higher education, is both part of what makes it strong and part of maybe what makes it slow to look for some sector-wide adoption of a particular innovation. But I do think more and

more as institutions of higher education will see working adults seeking additional credentials, people will be looking for competency-based education.

PAUL FAIN: Well, we'll leave it there. President Senese, thanks so much for talking this through with me. I know we barely scratched the surface, but I hope this isn't the last time we talk about this.

DICK SENESE: Of course. Happy to talk to you anytime.

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PAUL FAIN: That's it for this episode. Thanks for listening. I'll be back next week, going to speaking with Amy Perko from the Knight Commission about what's been going down in college athletics this year and what to expect next year. I hope you'll join us.