Chapter 4
Adult Learner–Centered and Scalable Online Competency–Based Education

David E. Leasure
Higher Learning Challenge LLC, USA

Daniel K. Apple
Pacific Crest, USA

Amy P. Fulton
University of Michigan, USA

Lucas B. Kavlie
Western Governors University, USA

ABSTRACT

The challenges of educating a shifting demographic for a shifting job market, with a solution that enhances educational equity and effectively develops competence, has been demonstrated by WGU’s implementation of competency-based education (CBE). WGU’s model is scalable and maintains affordability. The chapter presents an idealized model of CBE that extends the practice and analyzes its and WGU’s contribution to equitable education, affordability, and scalability. The analysis of the model’s contribution to equity highlights the importance of explicitly including identity and personal factors in assessment and evaluation. The idealized model is recommended to improve equity through encouraging self-growth, identity formation, evaluation, and assessment for improvement.

INTRODUCTION

Employment trends in the United States have shifted. Student demographics are shifting. All institutions face a growing demand from underserved categories of students (Snyder, de Brey, & Dillow, 2016, p. 497, tab. 306.30). Writing on behalf of State Higher Education Executive Officers and Complete College America, Zaback et al, in their report, Serving the Equity Imperative, call for intentional actions to DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-5085-3.ch004
improve student success to meet their responsibility to students, employers and society through equitable practices, effective learning, and support (2016 p. 2).

For institutions using traditional models of education to serve a new generation of non-traditional students, competency-based education, (CBE) as implemented at scale by Western Governors University (WGU), has been shown to effectively develop competence in students, reduce educational inequities, and maintain affordability while scaling up to larger enrollment (WGU, 2016).

This chapter covers the challenges of preparing students for the new economy, equitably serving traditionally underserved student populations, and proposes specific approaches to CBE to address these issues. It shares the history and theoretical underpinnings of CBE using WGU as an example of CBE in practice. It shares approaches to designing, implementing, and evaluating curriculum and competencies in hopes of greater use and acceptance of CBE, as well as continued improvement, innovation, and research in CBE application and outcomes.

BACKGROUND

Preparing Students for the New Economy

According to Carnevale, Jayasundera, and Gulish (2016), while employment opportunities for high-school graduates have been falling for decades, it has dropped to a new low. In 2007, workers with a high school diploma or less held 39% of the jobs in the US. In 2016, this figure dropped 5 points to 34% (p. 15). In terms of volume, the report states that, between December 2007 and January 2010, workers with high school diplomas lost 5.6 million jobs, while workers with a bachelor’s degree or higher gained 187,000. Between January 2010 and April 2016, jobs for high school graduates rebounded weakly, recovering only 80,000 of the jobs lost, while jobs for holders of a bachelor’s or higher degree grew by 8.4 million jobs (p. 2).

Beyond numbers, the gap of individually realized benefits of a college degree over a HS diploma continues to widen. According to the College Board’s Education Pays 2016 (Ma, Pender, & Welch, 2016), benefits to educated individuals include greater pay, less unemployment, better health, and more socio-economic mobility. Benefits to society include higher tax revenue, greater civic engagement, and more time spent with children. According to the report, for those who do not complete a college degree, the detriments in debt and opportunity cost are punitive.

Meeting Employer Expectations

There are widely agreed-upon benefits to earning a college degree. Employers hire graduates with the belief that they possess the skills and capacity in key performance areas to create value for the organization and its stakeholders. However, college graduates are not often meeting employer expectations upon entering the workforce.

From two recent studies, we learn what employers expect in terms of performance and which skill-deficits in recent graduates cause the highest disappointment among employers, the National Association of Collegiate Employers annual survey (NACE 2016) and PayScale.com’s 2016 Workforce-Skills Preparedness Report (PayScale 2016). Consistent with common usage, these studies describe competencies as skills. Table 1 shows the top five skills sought by 70% or more of employers (NACE, 2016).