



MISSOURI HIGHER EDUCATION EQUITY  
**BRIDGES TO SUCCESS**

**WHITE PAPER:**

**COMPETENCY  
BASED LEARNING -  
EQUITY AND COVID**



DEPARTMENT OF  
HIGHER EDUCATION &  
WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

PUBLISHED JULY 2021

# CURRENT STATUS

---

The Missouri Department of Higher Education & Workforce Development's (MDHEWD) 2019 and 2020 Equity Reports identified factors that influence which students experience equity-related barriers to accessing or completing a degree or credential.<sup>1,2</sup> These include gender, age, race/ethnicity, parental income, parental education, and residential location. The COVID-19 disruption to postsecondary learning added new and different obstacles, including access to technology, job loss, and additional caregiving responsibilities that may disproportionately affect students already experiencing equity gaps.<sup>3</sup> Helping all students surmount pandemic-induced problems while developing policies supporting the equitable attainment of a degree or credential is imperative to realize MDHEWD's vision: "Every Missourian empowered with the skills and education needed for success."

## CBE AND EQUITY

---

Competency Based Education (CBE) is an education model with the potential to address long-standing equity barriers for students. In most CBE models, students progress through a course or program upon demonstrating mastery of the necessary content and skills, rather than by earning "seat-time" credit hours in a classroom. Per the Aurora Institute, students are empowered in their learning experiences and receive differentiated support based on their individual needs. In its 2018 report, *Designing for Equity: Leveraging Competency-Based Education to Ensure All Students Succeed*, the Aurora Institute argued equity and fairness demand that education is personalized to respond to students as individuals.<sup>4</sup>

The U.S. Department of Education uses "Competency Based Learning" and "Personalized Learning" interchangeably, and underscores why CBE is important to the conversation about equity in higher education.<sup>5</sup> Outcomes are improved when the pace of learning is customized to each student's unique needs; at its core, competency based education prioritizes the outcome over the process.

A traditional education model prescribes the length of time during which course content will be offered. Adding online or hybrid modes of delivery to a seated course can expand access to content, but does not address other areas of personalized, flexible learning that CBE is poised to deliver. In CBE, learning outcomes provide the structure of the course, and students may use a variety of methods to demonstrate proficiency. Content is available when and how a student is most suited to access it, usually online, and demonstrations of learning may take many forms. Assessments are used to evaluate whether the student has met an outcome. Students receive specialized support when needed, and strategies are personalized to ensure each student sets and sustains a pace of learning that leads them toward proficiency and completion. The goal is student success and instructors have a variety of tools and supports to help all students be successful. This commitment to the educational needs and learning style of the individual links competency based delivery to equity.

---

<sup>1</sup> "2019 Equity in Missouri Higher Education Report." Missouri Department of Higher Education and Workforce Development.

<sup>2</sup> "2020 Equity in Missouri Higher Education Report." Missouri Department of Higher Education and Workforce Development.

<sup>3</sup> Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights. (2021, June). *Education in a Pandemic: The Disparate Impacts of Covid-19 on America's Students*. U.S. Department of Education. <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/20210608-impacts-of-covid19.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Aurora Institute. (2020, June 30). Competency-Based Education. <https://aurorainstitute.org/ourwork/competencyworks/competency-based-education/>

<sup>5</sup> Competency-Based Learning or Personalized Learning. (2021, May 27). Ed.Gov. <https://www.ed.gov/oiinews/competency-based-learning-or-personalized-learning>

In CBE, students make decisions about learning that suit their individual needs. Since students have different motives for pursuing higher education, institutions should offer multiple methods of demonstrating learning and pathways to completion. The current structure of credit-hour and seat-time based higher education limits options for those who do not have the time or money to complete a long and expensive program. When students set their own pace for learning, saving time and money can be a powerful motivator. Within a competency based model, students are able to advance through course content at their own pace. Consequently, CBE students who come to higher education with workforce experience or with some college and no degree may complete their program of study sooner than their seat-time counterparts. Evidence also suggests CBE programs serve a greater proportion of students with prior credits than traditional programs. CBE's greatest strength is that it provides a means for helping quality and affordability co-exist in higher education.<sup>6</sup>

When time-to-completion is the variable, students have the opportunity to accelerate learning and either enter the workforce more rapidly or obtain education and skills for advancement; each are compelling motivators. Additionally, employers may consider CBE as a strategy to retrain displaced workers and to fill critical workforce needs. Further, there is a shift underway with employers focusing more on proof of competency in critical areas rather than on the type of degree or credential earned. When designing successful competency based education programs, direct connections to labor market needs, including working with employers to establish both content and assessments, are crucial to ensure students are on a path to economic stability via demonstrated mastery of in-demand skills.

No discussion of CBE would be complete without referencing Western Governors University (WGU), an innovator and one of the best-known providers of competency based higher education. WGU-Missouri is a non-profit, bachelor's and master's degree granting institution that has been certified to offer business, health and nursing, teaching, and IT programs online in the state since 2017. The university enrolls more than 3,100 students, 70 percent of whom belong to one or more underserved populations. The institution experienced a 28 percent average annual growth rate in enrollment and their graduation rate grew annually by 38 percent between 2012 and 2019, suggesting their educational model resonates with students. The work to pivot traditional programs to competency based is significant and requires engagement from all stakeholders, both in and outside of an institution. WGU offers resources to other postsecondary institutions to help develop and implement competency based education, including ways to integrate CBE into the existing educational structure.<sup>7</sup>

## CONCLUSION

---

Competency based education is a model where learning overrides seat-time, where outcomes map more readily to workforce needs, and where students gain desired credentials in a compressed timeframe. The pandemic has shown that rapid change in higher education is possible, if not always easy, and has highlighted pathways to drive structural change. With a disrupted education system, institutions have an opportunity to rethink their current systems and to consider revising seat-based systems to make them more flexible, engaging, and equitable for all students.

---

<sup>6</sup> Johnstone, S.M. & Soares, L. (2014) Principles for Developing Competency-Based Education Programs, Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning, 46:2, 12-19, DOI: 10.1080/00091383.2014.896705

<sup>7</sup> Levin, J., & Besendorfer, A. (2021, February 11). *Understanding Equity Across the Student Experience* [Slides]. Missouri Department of Higher Education and Workforce Development Bridges to Success Series. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3oXzFj4PIZM>