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Innovative Program Delivery: Performance-Based Education

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Abstract

Higher education today faces many challenges with less financial support from the government, rising tuition costs, and the greater public questioning the value of degrees earned. The increase of for-profit universities entering the market has added to these challenges by increasing the competition for student enrollment. Institutions everywhere are looking at alternative methods for increasing enrollment, meeting student needs, and providing high-quality and relevant programs that lead to increased degree completion and greater possible employment after graduation. One method rising to the forefront of postsecondary educational practice to help meet these demands is performance-based education. While performance-based education has been consistently implemented into K–12 systems and vocational education for decades, it is now increasing its visibility and support with

postsecondary institutions all across the United States. This chapter will review the reasoning behind this increase of performance-based education, how it can benefit both the consumer and institution, and how it can provide students the skills and knowledge to increase their ability to positively impact the workforce environment.

Introduction

Higher education today faces many challenges including the increasing cost to students. In public universities, the decline in state contribution across the nation has led to double-digit increases in tuition, effectively pricing out entire populations from higher education access. In private colleges and universities, costs and associated tuition are also on the rise, making private higher education even more difficult to attain. Financial aid advisors in both public and private sectors encourage students to rely on support from the government increasingly from loans, making the debt load on students unbearable. The attempts to make higher education responsible to the consumer through rules like gainful employment have failed to this point, requiring students and their families to fend for themselves in an overcrowded market.

The entrance of for-profit universities into the market has only made the area more complex. With the promise of fast access and lower price to online programs, these too have run afoul of their claims, delivering instead low graduation rates and high government and accreditation scrutiny.

The total number of students entering higher education has declined in the last several years. In part this reflects the demographics of the high school graduation cycle, but also it reflects the economy and the costs of higher education. Even though numerous research articles suggest that the return on increasingly higher degrees in terms of earning power is significant, the cost of entry is preventing a large portion of the population from these benefits. Colleges enrolled 2.3 percent fewer students this spring than last, a steeper drop than the 1.8 percent decline reported by the National Student Clearinghouse for the fall (NSC Reports, 2013).

Less than 50 percent of all students complete their bachelor's degree in four years, and the U.S. Department of Education (DOE) calculates completion rates now on the basis of six-year data, reflecting the realization that students take longer to graduate. This longer completion rate also suggests that more

students are stopping out to work, and more than half of students currently enrolled in college work twenty or more hours in addition to attending college.

This increase in completion time has necessitated the partial reinvention of the way academic programs are offered. The availability of online classes has skyrocketed, reflecting the reality that students cannot always leave work and life responsibilities to attend school. Many students are also exiting and re-entering higher education with work experiences. Acknowledging the value of these experiences and the related competencies, many higher education administrators are implementing competency- or performance-based education options. These new programs, which focus on student performance rather than instruction time, are quickly moving to the forefront of higher education and being offered at colleges and universities all over the world.

Origins

While performance-based education seems to have recently appeared with great magnitude in postsecondary education, its concept has been around for centuries in one format or another, historically being referred to as outcomes education or outcomes-based education. This type of educational practice has been largely used in K–12 education for decades and has also been a driving force in vocational and trade schools since the 1900s. Klein-Collins (2012) articulated the following historical facts about outcomes-based education in her article for the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL). Outcomes-based education made its appearance into postsecondary education in the 1960s when the U.S. Office of Education funded ten colleges and universities to develop pilot training programs for elementary school teachers. By the 1970s, performance-based education programs emerged as important models for serving the increasing numbers of adults returning to college. At this time the U.S. Department of Education's Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education provided significant grant support for adult learning programs to develop competency-based models. With progress linked to performance (rather than seat time) this new model for education offered many benefits to returning adults, including recognition of prior learning that adults had acquired through other institutions or outside sources (Klein-Collins, 2012).

This new approach to learning and completion of degree proved to be valuable and in demand; a vast increase of colleges and universities began recognizing prior experience. While many administrators of the traditional colleges and universities spoke intensely against this new form of learning and recognition, nontraditional innovative institutions began to rise and move to the forefront of postsecondary education around the world, bringing new focus to students' demonstration of learning.

Performance-Based Education

As the economy evolves, there is growing recognition of the importance of a well-educated workforce (Klein-Collins, 2012). Employers want clear and direct links between learning occurring in postsecondary education and skills needed to successfully complete workplace demands. Emphasis on seat time and courses completed through lectures is giving way to ability and skills gained through experience and completion of clearly defined competencies that directly relate to workforce needs.

Unlike traditional programs where the emphasis is on hours accumulated through seat time in lecture halls to earn credits toward a degree, performance-based education places the locus of control on the student and her ability to demonstrate learning through real-life performance tasks, similar to ones that workers would encounter in actual workplace situations. Students receive clearly defined competencies and must demonstrate their ability to meet or exceed them. The International Board of Standards for Training and Performance Instruction (IBSTPI, 2005) defines competency as, "a knowledge, skill, or attitude that enables one to effectively perform the activities of a given occupation or function to the standards expected in employment." The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) for the DOE defines competency as, "the combination of skills, abilities, and knowledge needed to perform a specific task" (National Postsecondary Education Cooperative Working Group, 2002, p. 7).

As seen with both these definitions, competencies include both a means and an end. The means is the knowledge, skills, and abilities that students accrue while actively researching and learning through multiple facets ranging from listening, reading, researching, watching, discussions, and more. It is the building of knowledge and experience that is crucial for students to develop a deep understanding of content to begin applying

this knowledge in diverse situations. The ability to effectively perform these new skills, applying the knowledge gained in a real-life workforce situation, for an employer, is the end to the means. The ends are often described in what many universities define as outcomes.

Outcomes are clearly defined expectations of the abilities that students must demonstrate proficiency in before progressing. Outcomes describe the "end" students achieve after completing the research and instruction provided. The amount and structure of outcomes ranges according to the program of study based on institutional and workforce needs. However, an essential requirement is that the outcomes must be clear, demonstrable, and directly relate to industry needs, workforce expectations, and the program of study. Outcomes are active descriptors of skills and abilities students must successfully exhibit to demonstrate learning rather than descriptors of what is to be taught. Outcomes relate directly to professional practice, rather than instruction as seen with objectives (Glennon, 2006). But the outcomes are the same for students in the regular curriculum or in a performance-based structure of learning; outcomes do not vary by mode of instruction as all students regardless of instructional format must be able to demonstrate proficiency in the outcomes. Outcomes can be written in various formats ranging from descriptive paragraph to detailed checklists, depending on the program. One example of an outcome is:

Demonstrate understanding of the three major types of research methods: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods, including
(a) how these are implemented correctly in current research, and
(b) which research method is best for an intended outcome.

In this outcome, the focus is on the demonstration of learning acquired rather than the amount of time the student has spent in a class listening to the instructor speak about a story used and what was noted as important to remember. With performance-based education, there is less emphasis on how the student learns the material or which learning objects were employed in acquiring the knowledge. Nor is the student told how she must demonstrate the new learning in a given task. The emphasis falls more on the demonstration of learning and that the student is able to correctly demonstrate the application of the learning in the best way possible for that student.

Another benefit to performance-based education is that students develop the ability to process and apply new learning in a variety of situations, enabling them to successfully complete tasks in flexible and various

formats. This furthers learning beyond simple recalling of facts to actual implementation of skills and ability. When students are given an outcome and rubric for assessment of that outcome, it enables them to take full responsibility for their own learning by determining the best course of action needed for them to complete the research, implement the new learning, and choose the best artifact to demonstrate this new learning.

It remains the responsibility of faculty members to provide guidance and support for students so that they can make informed choices about the learning objects available to successfully master the learning outcomes. Through interaction with peer groups, content experts, and program mentors, students are provided with multiple opportunities to collaborate, discuss, and expand upon previous experience, determining what needs to occur to ensure learning. These skills are crucial as flexibility and adaptability to meet workplace demands are highly sought-after skills in any corporation. As Klein-Collins (2012) stated, "The workplace now requires workers to be part of adaptable, effective working teams, and workers need to have much more than just technical skills, they also need to have adaptability, interpersonal competence, and the ability to deal with open-ended issues" (p. 10). These skills are in even more demand as the technology and the information age continue to advance exponentially.

Assessment

To ensure students have mastered the expected outcomes, they are assessed against the established standards of the course and program. One effective way to measure student learning and the ability to meet or exceed program outcomes is through the use of rubrics. Rubrics are assessment tools that provide detailed descriptors communicating expectations around the quality of completion on a task. By providing detailed explanations of expectations, rubrics enable students to have equal opportunity to succeed. While rubrics can be as simple as a checklist, all rubrics must contain criterion being assessed and the degree to which the student demonstrates meeting this criterion. The more detailed the descriptors for meeting each criterion, the more likely students will succeed. Rubrics are set like a table with the descriptors along the side and degree to which completion occurred across. A sample rubric for measuring student performance is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Sample Rubric

Demonstrate understanding of the three major types of research methods: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods, including (a) how these are implemented correctly in current research, and (b) which research method is best for an intended outcome.				
	Developing	Emerging	Proficient	Exemplary
Understanding	Artifact submitted: demonstrates a developing understanding by providing a cited definition of 1 or 2 research methods, but does not include all 3 or any components for methods	Artifact submitted: demonstrates an emerging understanding by providing cited definitions of each methodology, but does not articulate major components for each method	Artifact submitted: demonstrates a clear understanding of each major research method and is able to clearly articulate the major components of each method along with when best to apply each method	Artifact submitted: demonstrates a solid understanding of each major research method and is able to clearly articulate the major and minor components of each method Student clearly relates each method to increasing current classroom practices
Implementation	Artifact submitted: is not able to demonstrate correct implementation of the research methods	Artifact submitted: demonstrates correct implementation of 1 or 2 of the research methods articulates student's reasoning to explain the use of the method(s) chosen	Artifact submitted: demonstrates correct implementation of each research method articulates student's reasoning to explain the use of each method of research	Artifact submitted: demonstrates correct implementation of each research method clearly and directly articulates student's reasoning for the use of each method of research and provides citations of current research as additional support
Intention	Artifact submitted: does not state the reasoning why the research method chosen was chosen	Artifact submitted: states the research method chosen, but not able to clearly articulate why	Artifact submitted: clearly states the reasoning why the research method chosen is the best method to gather data needed	Artifact submitted: clearly and directly states the reasoning why the research method chosen is the best method to gather data needed and provides research citations to support reasoning

Through the use of a rubric, an instructor or evaluator can accurately indicate to what extent the student demonstrates proficiency in each of the indicators, assessing the areas of focus in the outcome. Highlighting the grading criterion to reflect the degree of completion for each indicator gives the instructor and the student clear and detailed information regarding performance. Rubrics are valuable in assessing student learning and informing students about instructors' expectations of them, empowering students to make the best choice for demonstrating their learning.

Value

Performance-based education is gaining considerable recognition from both students and employers looking to hire those students. When employers are interested in hiring a student, they do not seek out how many hours the student completed in a lecture hall or how many credits were tied to those hours. What they want is someone who can perform the required tasks to ensure organizational success. A student's competence is of greatest importance. Performance-based education goes far beyond the acquisition of knowledge; it develops the competencies needed to achieve the desired results. When implemented correctly, performance-based programs are of exceptional value because they are student-centered, flexible, and provide multiple avenues to demonstrate learning.

While performance-based education has been around for decades, it has only recently experienced a great surge in postsecondary education. Institutions are looking for ways to continue offering courses with less financial output. Using performance-based models for program delivery allows institutions to offer courses using mentors to guide students through completion based on student needs rather than instructors who would require students to attend daily lectures, regardless of the students' preexisting knowledge and skills. This type of delivery can substantially reduce expenses related to faculty pay and maintenance of physical classrooms.

Institutions that offer the performance-based model are positioned to acknowledge the skills a student learns outside of the classroom. This option can benefit students who are entering a program after attaining relevant experience in an employment setting. It also benefits students who are completing a program while working as it enables them to apply the knowledge and skills they are acquiring through the program in their

current workforce setting. Recognizing prior work experience ensures that all students receive equal opportunity toward degree completion and omits the possibility of favoritism toward completion of the credit hour over experience gained.

In the spring of 2012, performance-based education received public recognition from the acting assistant secretary of the U.S Department of Education, David Bergeron, in his "Dear Colleague" letter. In this letter, he provides guidance to institutions that wish to continue receiving federally funded financial aid for performance-based and direct-assessment programs. Bergeron also states, "competency-based approaches to education have the potential for assuring the quality and extent of learning, shortening the times to degree/certificate completion, developing stackable credentials that ease student transitions between school and work, and reducing the overall cost of education for both the career-technical and degree programs" (pp. 3–4). Bergeron also recognized the collaborative efforts between the department, accrediting agencies, and the higher education community to encourage the use of innovative approaches such as performance-based education. This formal recognition, along with his commitment to collaborate with accreditation and other research bodies to identify promising practices and gather data to inform future practices is a tremendous step forward in advancing alternative and innovative educational practices.

External constituencies have begun to focus less on the nature of the form of the delivery method for programs and degrees, and more on the quality of the program and degree. Through performance-based education, higher education administrators can ensure program quality by critically evaluating students' ability to demonstrate proficiency in program outcomes in ways that are relevant and applicable to their fields of study.

However, creating quality performance-based programs will not occur without close connections among institutions of higher education and future employers. Through this partnership, administrators can develop purposeful outcomes to actively prepare today's graduates for our rapidly changing workforce. With half of all college graduates being either unemployed or underemployed, quality performance-based programs can help to restructure the nation's current economic status into a stronger, more viable economy that promotes hiring college graduates at a steady pace.

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