General Education Steering Committee
Feedback Survey
March 11, 2015
Conference Call

Competency Based Education (CBE)

General Education Steering Committee members submitted responses to question prompts at the conclusion of our phone conversation with representatives from Western Governor’s University discussing Competency-Based Education. The responses are included below. All responses included below are unedited unless the nature of the response identified the respondent; when necessary, BOR staff made edits to retain the nature of the statement while hiding the identity of the respondent.

Executive Summary of Survey Results: Committee members generally agree that CBE is not a viable model for South Dakota at this time in terms of a large-scale approach. Some opportunities may exist to explore new CBE courses inside and outside of general education. There are aspects of WGU’s CBE approach, however, that may be useful, including but not limited to WGU’s multi-faceted approach to program and course development.

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1. What elements, if any, of the competency-based education (CBE) model should we consider using to a greater extent in South Dakota?

• The idea of student mentors, some specific person who checks in with online students over the course of a semester. On the one hand, this might just be an unneeded expense. But on the other, it might make our online courses highly competitive nationally.

• There is not really anything from this model that is applicable to our devising Gen Eds. If we wish to separate the assessment of Gen Eds. from courses and use separate testing tools which are common across institutions it may have utility. Otherwise there is not really a lot here for us to use.

• In order to switch to CBE model, we would have to rethink our entire structure. Without further information about how the assessment is actually carried out, it doesn't seem to be a "better" model than our current structure.

• I think that our current online offerings (and likely more in the future) offer the sort of flexibility that is one of the hallmarks of CBE. I don't think that we gain much in terms of flexibility. I do think that a system that allowed for greater recognition of competencies that students bring into their education would be an element of CBE that would be something that should be explored. Certainly many nontraditional students have accumulated competencies/knowledge. Maybe adopting some of the CBE classes as a method to recognize student competencies would encourage nontraditional recruitment. I also think that we might consider incorporating some of WGU’s approach to program/course development. The process begins by incorporating employer input about the needs in the labor force. I think this is a valuable contribution in curriculum development. I believe that many of the comments
that we would receive from employers would center on competencies/knowledge gained in general education courses.

- Given the large cost of CBE implementation and management, I believe we should wait to see the outcome of other university initiatives. However, I do believe we should strengthen our PLA and portfolio review options. As well, as offering more accelerated and condensed courses.

- The current buzzword appears to be "unbundling." But this CBE model works best for non-traditional students with work experience and specific goals. It's not as well suited to the traditional, less-experienced student.

- There is something to say for competency-based education, and maybe some aspect of it could be helpful in the SD system, but from our brief exposure, I can't really identify what that might be.

- It may be a possible approach for a few skills courses, but I do not see how we could put this model in wide-spread use. Not all classes will adapt easily to this format. Subjects where discussion is important in developing ideas and where group work is important would be difficult to offer in a self-paced format. Lab sciences also would not work well.

2. What barriers or challenges exist for how competency-based education would fit within our current general education structure, and/or the processes and procedures we have in place for managing general education?

- The most obvious difficulty is that competency-based education doesn't readily allow for the assignment of grades. Also, any program like this would depend on establishing high standards. In traditional and online classes, students who just barely pass have met a very low threshold indeed. To pass in a competency-based environment, the standard might need to be closer to a current B+. However, the biggest challenge is probably that most people don't learn in a way that fits with this model.

- The need to separate courses from the assessment process for Gen Eds. across institutions.

- As mentioned, it would require a total revamping of our faculty structure. If doing this for Gen Ed, why stop there? But, it is unclear that this is a "better" model.

- Any move to a CBE model as part of the general education requirements would certainly require us to reconsider our current perspectives. The credit/no credit grading system would, I believe, be one hurdle that we would need to overcome. I don't believe there would be popular support of a large-scale move to a CBE model, but I think that a few of the tenents/practices of CBE (outlined earlier) might be beneficial to consider.

- The barriers and challenges are potentially numerous, including: tracking of student records outside of any semester timeframe; personnel costs (e.g. student success coaches, course
development, administrative oversight, etc.); federal financial aid approval, etc. UW System anticipates that over the next 5 years, for 10 programs, they will have spent $25 million. And, right now, each program is limited to 10 students per month or subscription period in order for them to manage it.

- The basic idea of measuring student progress by competency vs. time sounds better than it is. Time—the traditional credit-hour measure—can be assessed by both course completion and competency based on performance during that time (grades). It works. The new competency based model still ends up measure "CUs" or some other units. In addition, competency-only models rely on testing at each level leading to "teaching towards the test."

- How competency-based education fits with general education was not made clear. Until we look at some of these programs in action, it would be difficult to understand how it lines up with our general education structure.

- Considering the design principles discussed in the call (and on the slides provided), our current courses meet all of them but the self-paced timeline for completing the course. I am not sure that there is going to be a great demand for competency-based courses among our traditional aged students. We have some math courses that are self-paced, and our greatest problem is pushing students to finish. Western Governor’s has a staff of over 1,400 mentors who call each student every week to keep them on track. Are we willing to establish a support system like that?

3. What additional issues/questions still exist for your as a committee member regarding CBE that we should seek to uncover?

- None. I don't think this is a viable model for our work.

- None.

- It is still unclear what role faculty play in delivering material, and how they manage students at different levels at the same time. It is also unclear how student mentors juggle 100 students at a time and are still close enough to the students to be the 2nd ones to know that a student is having a baby, for example. Are the student mentors necessary in a small school setting? Is this even applicable to a bricks and mortar institution? Or should we go completely CBE for all Gen Eds across the system?

- There were at least two questions asked during the presentation that I do not believe were adequately answered: 1) How does CBE work with general education and how does WGU do it? 2) What sort of state-level partnerships does WGU have, and do any involve GE?

- I would like to have more information on how we could increase our PLA and portfolio review offerings.
• At this point I would put aside any conversation about CBE until we have further discussions about the other programs we visited.

• Even if faculty try to develop CBE courses, there are some roadblocks in the system that would need to be addressed. How long do students have to complete the material before they must re-register? How often will they pay? How will faculty be compensated if courses are not tied to a traditional calendar?