

A NEW MEASURE FOR COLLEGIATE LEARNING

What Presidents Think About the Promises and Pitfalls
of Competency-Based Education



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A New Measure for Collegiate Learning: What Presidents Think About the Promises and Pitfalls of Competency-Based Education is based on a survey conducted by Maguire Associates, Inc., was written by Jeffrey J. Selingo, contributing editor at The Chronicle of Higher Education, Inc. and is sponsored by Pearson. The Chronicle is fully responsible for the report's editorial content. Copyright © 2015.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The credit hour has reigned supreme for more than a century as the standard for measuring the passage of time in higher education. Originally designed to calculate faculty members' eligibility to receive a pension, it is now at the foundation of so many American college traditions from courses to semesters, and mostly, as a measure for graduation: 60 credit hours equal an associate's degree and 120 hours lead to a bachelor's.

The creators of the credit hour never meant for it to measure how much students learn. Yet that's how it came to be used because it was an easy accounting method: a credit was one hour of classroom time and two hours of outside work during a traditional 15-week semester. In reality, however, it didn't really indicate that students knew anything at the end of their degree except that they had the discipline to finish enough courses.

But after a series of studies in recent years questioning the limited learning happening on college and university campuses, there is a push among higher-education leaders to find alternative approaches to measuring the educational value of a college degree. One of the most discussed and tested of those strategies is competency-based education.

Competency-based education typically is defined as learning that is measured by what students actually know rather than how much time they spend in a seat. Students usually can earn credit in one of two ways: based on content they have previously mastered in other settings, such as the workplace or the military, or by moving through a self-paced degree program by passing a series of assessment tests.

Until recently, competency-based education was widely seen as a fringe idea in higher education. But in the past few years, several high-profile experiments by name-brand institutions, including Northern Arizona University and the University of Wisconsin, have moved it to the forefront of the conversation about reducing costs and improving outcomes.

Now an extensive survey of college and university presidents, conducted by The Chronicle of Higher Education in the spring of 2015, shows widespread support for awarding credits based on competencies. It found, for example, that nearly two-thirds of presidents say their institutions are likely to offer competency-based degree programs in the next five years.

The survey, completed by nearly 200 presidents, focused on their attitudes about the role of competency-based education, their

experience with alternative forms of measuring learning, and the potential barriers to change.

Among the key findings of the survey:



INNOVATION

Higher-education institutions are under extreme pressure from lawmakers and the public to change how they do business. College leaders see competency-based education as a potential game-changer along with experiential, adaptive, and hybrid learning.



COST CONTROL

College presidents have high hopes for competency-based education to deliver potential cost savings to their campuses. When asked about the top three innovations for cost control at their institutions, more than half of the presidents selected competency-based education.



SLOW ADOPTION

While the majority of presidents favor awarding credits based on competencies, only a quarter of leaders surveyed said they currently offer competency-based degrees. Another 10 percent have them in development, and one-third are exploring such programs.



BIGGEST BENEFITS

With roughly 45 million Americans over the age of 24 who have some college and no degree, according to the National Student Clearinghouse, presidents surveyed agreed that an expansion of competency-based education could benefit mostly adult and non-traditional students.



DEVELOPING COMPETENCIES

One knock against competency-based education is that it would be difficult to develop learning outcomes for some disciplines. Presidents in the survey said it would be easiest to develop competencies in computer science, business, and math and most difficult in the humanities and liberal arts.



AWARDING CREDIT

Competency-based programs differ greatly in their operations. At some institutions, faculty members develop competencies and award credit, while at other campuses those tasks are assigned to a separate group to save money.

INTRODUCTION

TODAY, ABOUT 50 COLLEGES OFFER SOME FORM OF COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION OR HAVE ANNOUNCED PLANS TO START A PROGRAM.

In early 2015, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching released a two-year study of the credit hour, also known as the Carnegie Unit. It concluded that the unit of measure the foundation developed in the early 1900s to determine which faculty members would be eligible for a pension still remained the best way to track the collection of college credits.

The report, *The Carnegie Unit: A Century-Old Standard in a Changing Education Landscape*, was commissioned because the credit hour had come under fire from higher-education reformers who said it presented too high of a barrier for innovative practices in the academy. Of particular concern was a new way to measure learning that had been gaining prominence in the past decade: competency-based education.

While the particulars of competency-based education differ by institution, the general concept is the same: Students demonstrate mastery of a subject through a series of assessment tests or assignments, instead of following a prescribed set of courses. Faculty mentors work closely with students throughout a degree program to design a schedule and access the learning materials they need to demonstrate mastery and then another group of course evaluators grades those exams, research papers, or performance assessments.

One of the pioneers of competency-based education was Western Governors University. It was created in 1995 when nearly 20 governors from Western states gathered for a meeting and agreed it was easier to form a new college than try to reform their existing ones.

Western Governors offers a no-frills experience. It is, of course, online only. It focuses its 50 degrees in just four disciplines: education, business, information technology, and health professions. The university now boasts 41,000 students and is growing at a breakneck pace of 40 percent a year. Its teacher-education program is the largest supplier of math and science teachers in urban schools nationwide. Since 2010, three states—Indiana, Texas, and Washington—have created official spin-offs, allowing residents to access state financial aid programs to pay for tuition.

Today, about 50 colleges offer some form of competency-based education or have announced plans to start a program, according to Robert Kelchen, an assistant professor of higher education at Seton Hall University and an expert on competency-based education who authored a recent report on the subject for the American Enterprise Institute (**see map**).





COMPETENCY-BASED PROGRAMS 2014*

- | | |
|--|---|
| 1 Alverno College (Milwaukee, WI) | 18 Kentucky Community and Technical College System (Versailles, KY) |
| 2 Bellevue College (Bellevue, WA) | 19 Lipscomb University (Nashville, TN) |
| 3 Broward College (Davie, FL) | 20 Lone Star College System (Houston, TX) |
| 4 Capella University (Minneapolis, MN) | 21 Marylhurst University (Marylhurst, OR) |
| 5 Charter Oak State College (New Britain, CT) | 22 Northern Arizona University (Flagstaff, AZ) |
| 6 Colorado State University Global (Greenwood Village, CO) | 23 Rio Salado College (Phoenix, AZ) |
| 7 Columbia Basin College (Pasco, WA) | 24 Sinclair Community College (Dayton, OH) |
| 8 Davenport University (Grand Rapids, MI) | 25 SNHU's College for America (Manchester, NH) |
| 9 DePaul University (Chicago, IL) | 26 Spokane Falls Community College (Spokane, WA) |
| 10 Edmonds Community College (Lynnwood, WA) | 27 Thomas Edison State College (Trenton, NJ) |
| 11 Empire State College (Saratoga Springs, NY) | 28 University of Maine at Presque Isle (Presque Isle, ME) |
| 12 Excelsior College (Albany, NY) | 29 University of Maryland University College (College Park, MD) |
| 13 George Mason University (Fairfax, VA) | 30 University of Toledo (Toledo, OH) |
| 14 Granite State College (Rochester, NH) | 31 University of Wisconsin (Madison, WI) |
| 15 Ivy Tech Community College (Indianapolis, IN) | 32 Valencia College (Orlando, FL) |
| 16 John F. Kennedy University (Pleasant Hill, CA) | 33 Western Governors University (Salt Lake City, UT) |
| 17 Kalamazoo Valley Community College (Kalamazoo, MI) | 34 Westminster College (Salt Lake City, UT) |

*Does not include 18 programs in development SOURCE: *The Landscape of Competency-Based Education* by Robert Kelchen

COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION IS ALSO GAINING TRACTION WITHIN STATE LEGISLATURES AND THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT AS AN APPROACH TO TAME RUNAWAY COLLEGE TUITION PRICES.

The idea also is gaining traction within state legislatures and the federal government as an approach to tame runaway college tuition prices. In the summer of 2014, the U.S. House of Representatives unanimously passed a bill to support the development of 30 pilot competency-based programs at colleges and universities.

Even so, competency-based education often is met with skepticism within academic circles, particularly among faculty, who view seat time as the only measure of learning and have very little understanding about how it works.

This brief attempts to inform institutions of alternative methods of measuring student learning on their campuses. It is based on a survey of presidents that explores their attitudes about the role of competency-based education, their experience with alternative forms of measuring learning, and the potential barriers to change.

COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION: WHAT IS IT, WHO OFFERS IT, WHO ENROLLS?

In the summer of 2013, the president of Southern New Hampshire University, Paul LeBlanc, announced that the university's competency-based program, called College for America, had its first graduate. He was a 21-year-old from Ohio who had completed his associate's degree in about three months.

While LeBlanc admitted the student was in many ways an outlier—most students wouldn't finish their degrees that quickly—the announcement was a powerful illustration of the idea of competency-based education where students often determine how quickly they move through the program.

**PRESIDENTS SAY
COMPETENCY-
BASED EDUCATION
COMES PACKAGED IN
DIFFERENT FORMS.**

Southern New Hampshire University, already well known for offering an extensive array of online degrees, was one of three major players to enter the business of competency-based education in 2012. The University of Wisconsin system and Northern Arizona University also developed programs the same year.

But just how many competency-based programs exist at colleges and universities remains unclear, says Seton Hall's Kelchen, because the landscape constantly is shifting and institutions take different approaches to what they all term competency-based education.

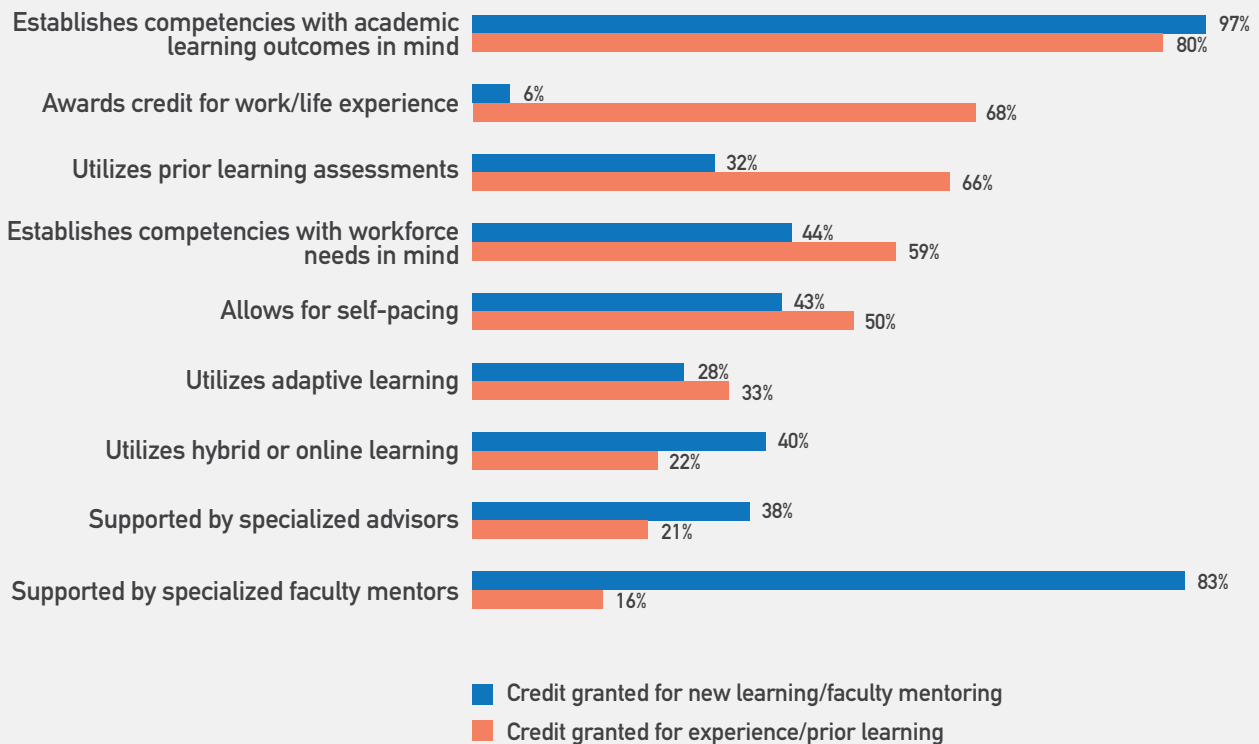
Indeed, even presidents surveyed by The Chronicle say competency-based education comes packaged in different forms. While they agree that any competency-based program begins with institutions laying out specific learning outcomes for students, they remain divided on exactly how credit should be awarded.

About two-thirds of presidents (62 percent) say credit should be given through prior-learning assessments that measure a student’s previous work experience and mastery of a subject. Another one-third of college leaders (38 percent) say that even students without specific prior learning in a subject could work with faculty mentors to move through degree programs at their own pace as they master established competencies.

In other words, one camp of presidents views competency-based education as credit for learning already accomplished, while the other group sees it as new learning. How presidents view the awarding of credit influences the ways they think such programs should be delivered to students. Online and hybrid learning (a mix of face-to-face and online), for instance, is more popular among those presidents who see competency-based education as new learning through assessments, not credit for prior learning (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1

ATTITUDES ON DELIVERY METHODS OF COMPETENCY-BASED PROGRAMS BASED ON PRESIDENTS OUTLOOK ON HOW CREDIT IS AWARDED



Despite some disagreement over the exact definition, The Chronicle survey found a high degree of familiarity with the concept of competency-based education. Eighty-six percent of presidents were familiar with the idea, and an equally high proportion, 88 percent, said they favored awarding academic credit for demonstrated competencies to either some or all of their students (see Figure 2).

While presidents might favor granting credit in this new way, only a quarter of them lead institutions already offering competency-based programs (see Figures 3 and 4), although nearly 20 percent said they are “very likely” or “extremely likely” to start such programs in the next five years (see Figure 5).

FIGURE 2

PRESIDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARD COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION

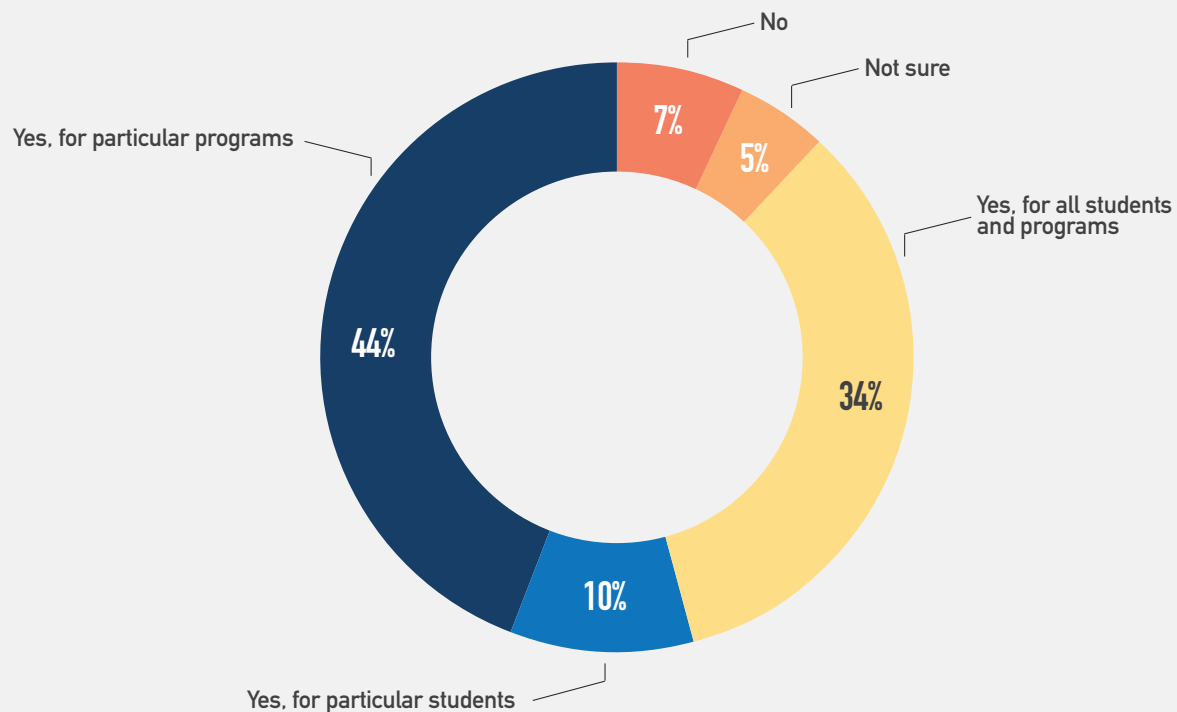


FIGURE 3

COLLEGES OFFERING CREDITS BASED ON EXPERIENCE OR PRIOR LEARNING

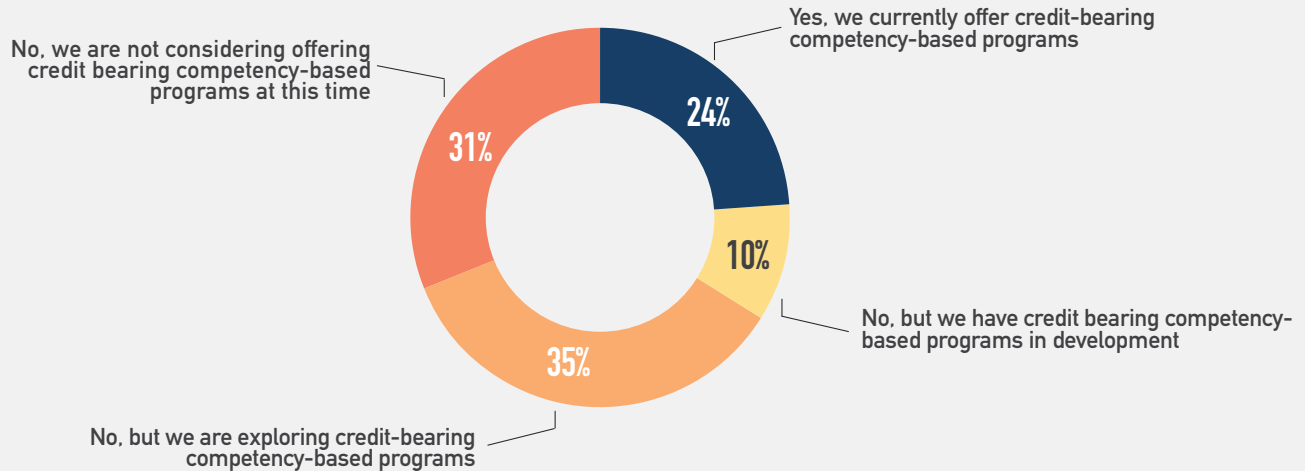


FIGURE 4

LENGTH OF TIME A COLLEGE HAS BEEN OFFERING CREDITS BASED ON EXPERIENCE OR PRIOR LEARNING

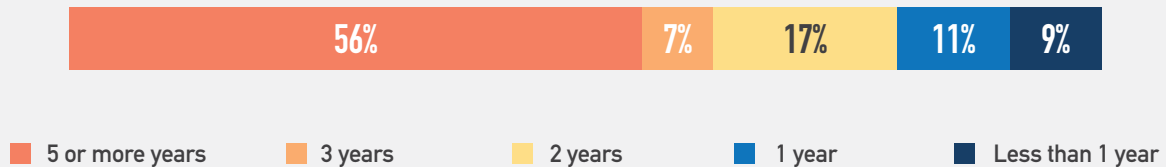
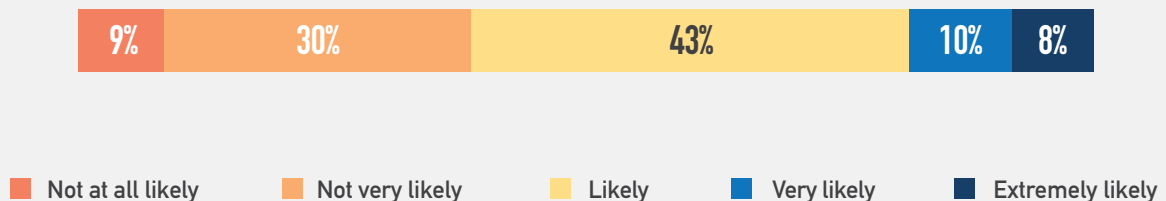


FIGURE 5

LIKELIHOOD OF STARTING A COMPETENCY-BASED PROGRAM WITHIN THE NEXT FIVE YEARS



“This is a way for institutions to develop a different business model with even stronger attention to learning outcomes—a win for students, faculty, and institutions,” one president wrote in an open-ended response to the survey.

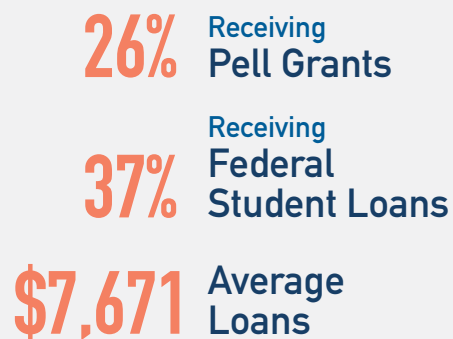
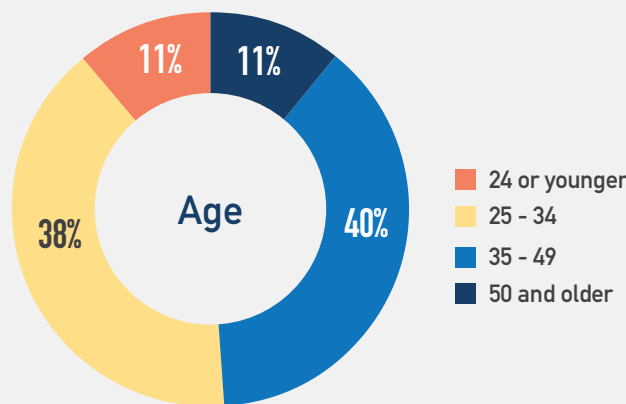
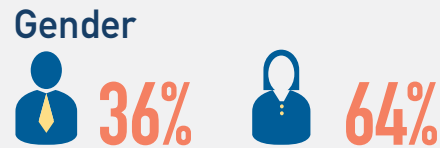
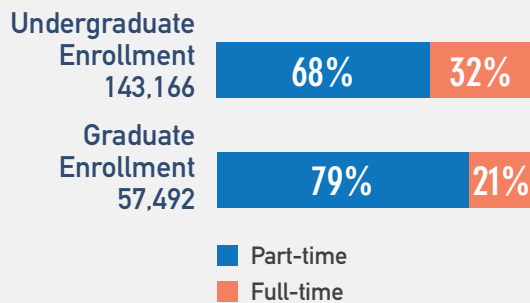
The primary beneficiaries of competency-based programs typically have been identified as time-pressed, place-bound adults with some college credits who need maximum flexibility to complete their degree and usually have substantial work experience. Yet researchers have had difficulty teasing out the attributes of students

enrolled in competency-degree programs. That’s because they are not segregated from other students at a university unless the competency-based program is a free-standing one, like at Western Governors University.

There are nine free-standing, competency-based institutions that enroll some 200,000 undergraduate and graduate students. Most of the students enroll part-time and nine in 10 students in the programs are older than 25 (see Figure 6).

FIGURE 6

CHARACTERISTICS OF STANDALONE COMPETENCY-BASED INSTITUTIONS

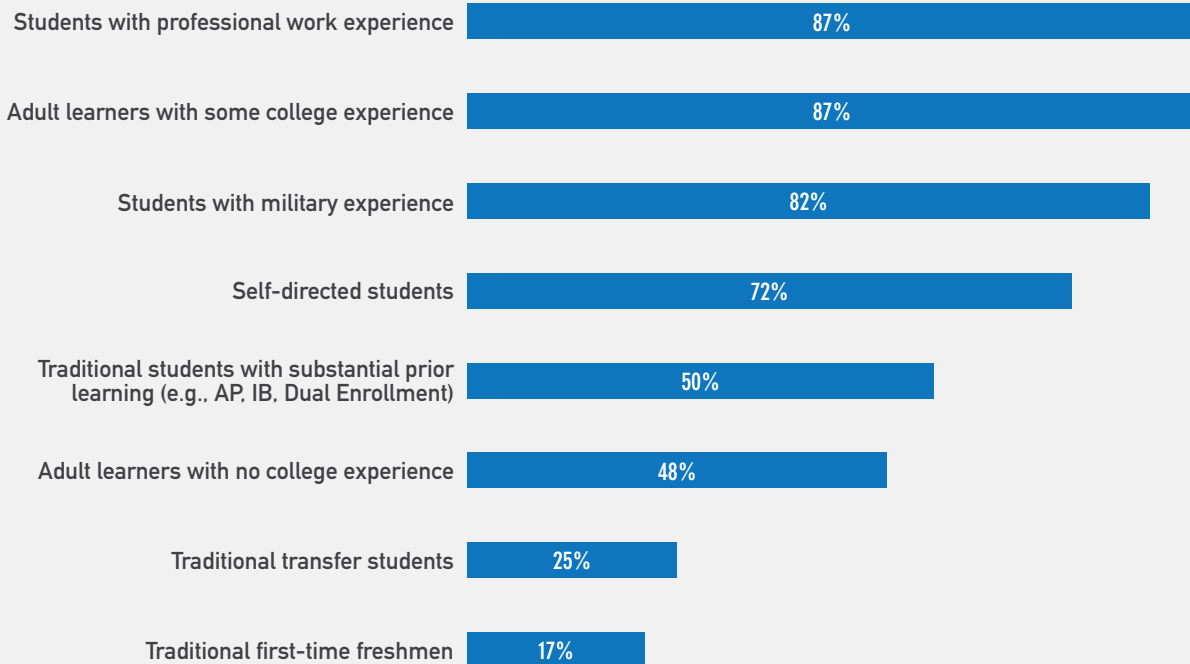


SOURCE: The Landscape of Competency-Based Education by Robert Kelchen

Indeed, presidents in The Chronicle survey agreed that the current student demographics of competency-based programs—especially students with professional work experience, adult learners with some college experience, and students with a military background—should remain their primary targets in the future as the number of programs expands (see Figure 7).

FIGURE 7

ATTITUDES ON TYPES OF STUDENTS WHO WOULD BENEFIT FROM COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION



REDUCING COSTS OR IMPROVING QUALITY

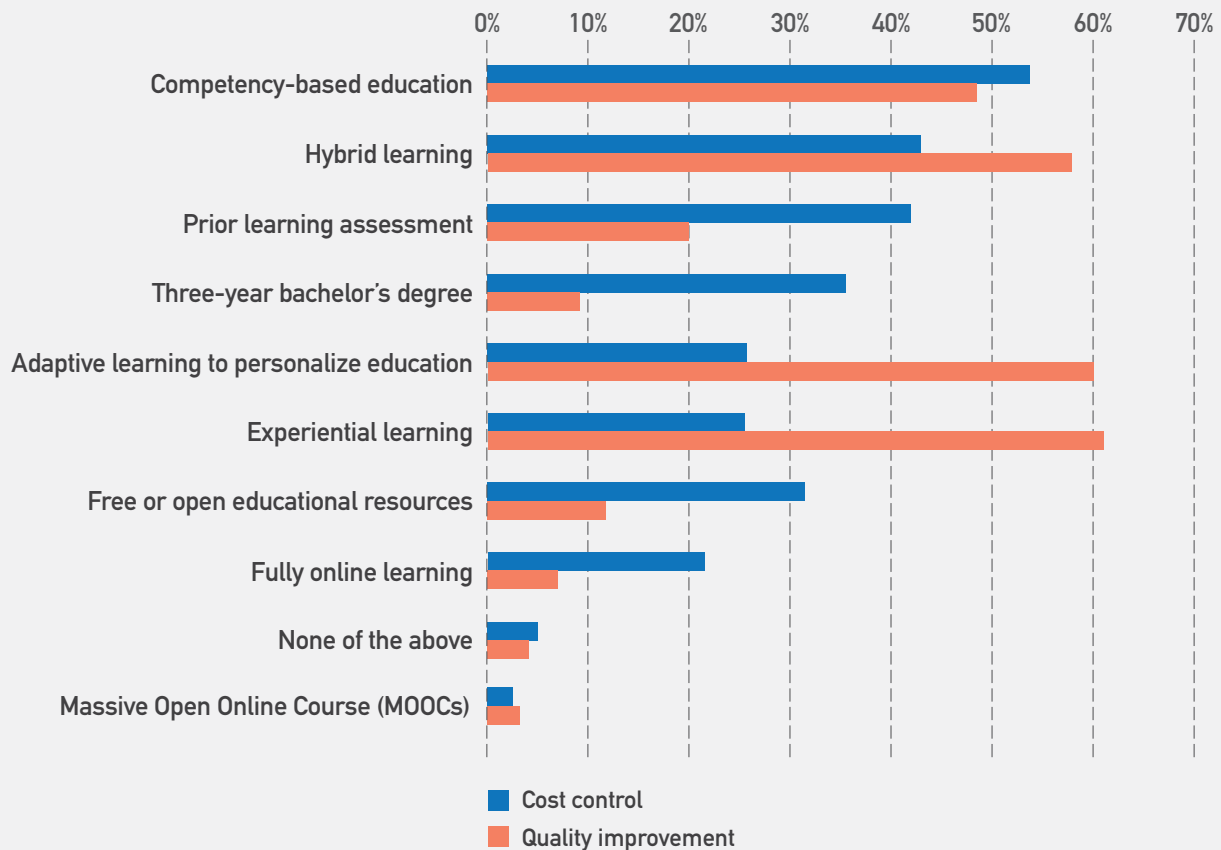
COMPETENCY-BASED PROGRAMS HAVE GAINED PROMINENCE IN RECENT YEARS BECAUSE THEY ARE SEEN AS ONE OF THE FEW NEW IDEAS IN HIGHER EDUCATION THAT HAVE AN OPPORTUNITY TO REDUCE COSTS.

Competency-based programs have gained prominence in recent years because they are seen as one of the few new ideas in higher education that have an opportunity to reduce costs. The average student at Western Governors, for instance, completes a bachelor's degree in about two and half years for a price tag in the neighborhood of \$15,000. That's about half the time it takes the typical student to get a bachelor's degree and half the price of the average public college, according to data from the College Board.

In The Chronicle survey, more than half the presidents said that competency-based education was the best strategy for controlling costs at institutions, but they did not see it as the top innovation for improving quality. The presidents gave higher marks to other strategies for improving quality, including hybrid learning; adaptive technologies where students move at their own pace; and experiential learning, such as projects, internships, and study abroad (see Figure 8).

FIGURE 8

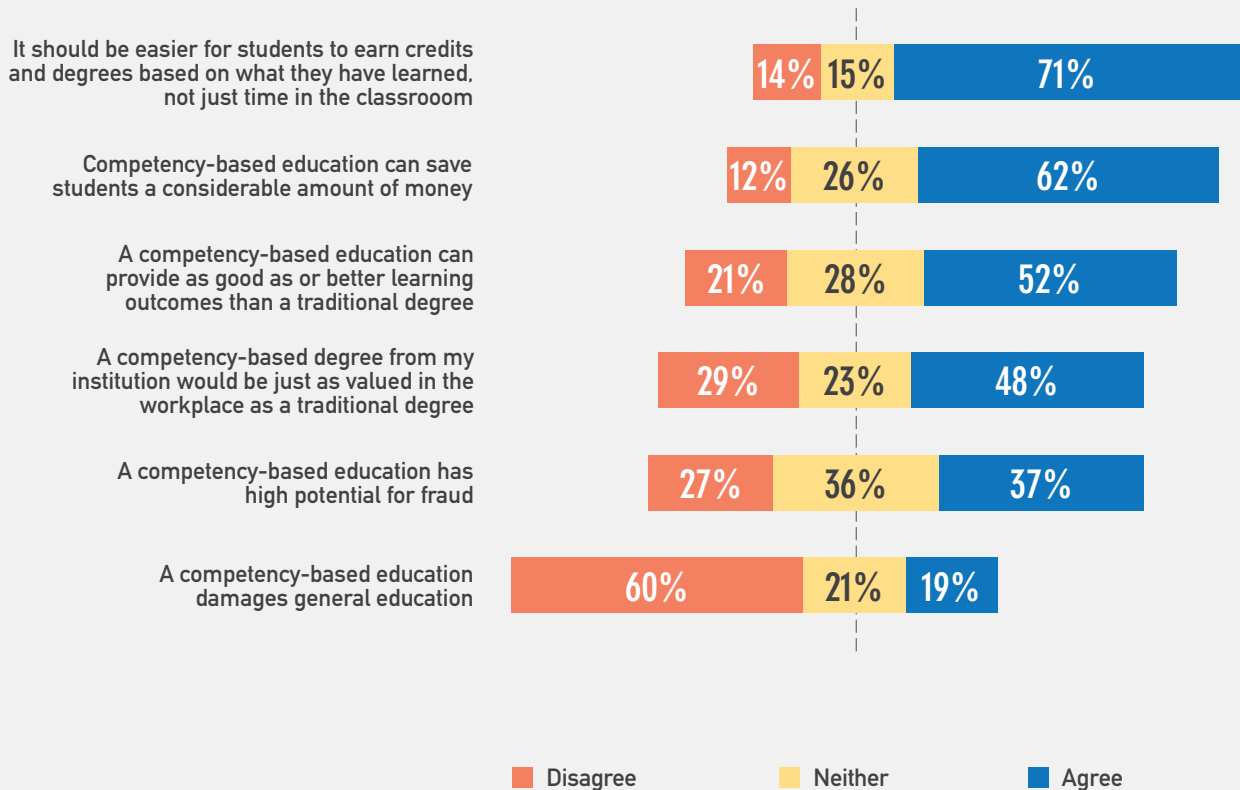
MOST PROMISING INNOVATIONS BASED ON THEIR POTENTIAL TO CONTROL COST OR IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF UNDERGRADUATE HIGHER EDUCATION



While nearly three in four presidents agreed that it should be easier for students to earn credits based on what they learned and not just how much time they spend in a classroom, some presidents remain worried about the unintended consequences of moving toward competency-based models. Some 20 percent of presidents said competency-based models damage general education and another 37 percent said they have the high potential for fraud (see Figure 9).

FIGURE 9

WHAT PRESIDENTS THINK ABOUT COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION



There remains a widespread perception in higher education that competency-based programs are a far more affordable route to earning a degree. But Seton Hall's Kelchen found in his research that whether it actually is a cheaper option depends largely on how quickly students finish and if they are allowed to access federal financial aid for their programs (federal aid formulas are based on the credit hour).

For example, average tuition is lower at Western Governors because, like four other competency-based programs, it has so-called "all-you-can-eat" pricing. For around \$3,000 a semester, students can take as many courses as they can complete in a six-month period. If they move through quickly, Kelchen noted, it would be less expensive than a traditional university.

But not all students are academically prepared to complete a bachelor's degree more quickly than the traditional four years. Already, just a little more than half of students who start a bachelor's degree finish it in five years, according to the U.S. Department of Education. Students fail to graduate for a variety of reasons, but the fundamental problem is that nearly 40 percent of freshmen arrive unprepared for college-level work and must enroll in remedial reading, writing, or math courses. Some 75 percent of colleges offer at least one remedial course, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. Whether those students are good candidates for competency-based programs remains a subject of debate within the academy.

WHAT'S NEXT FOR COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION

GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT OF COMPETENCY-BASED PROGRAMS IN THE FUTURE WILL NEED TO COME FROM A MIX OF STUDENTS, EMPLOYERS, AND LAWMAKERS.

One reason that competency-based education has received more attention in recent years is that alliances of institutions and foundations have formed to work on its development.

These alliances include the Competency-Based Education Network, with 18 institutions and support from the Lumina Foundation, as well as the Next-Generation Learning Challenges, with nine colleges and systems and support from Educause and the Gates Foundation.

Presidents in The Chronicle survey said that growth and development of competency-based programs in the future will need to come from a mix of students, employers, and lawmakers.

The biggest skeptics of competency-based programs are, perhaps, faculty members at traditional colleges and universities, and presidents said that they will be least likely to get behind efforts to expand the programs in the coming years (**see Figure 10**).

Also critical to the development of programs, presidents said, are industry experts. But presidents were in agreement that, ultimately, faculty members in specific departments should judge the competencies and quality of the program before credit is awarded (**see Figure 11**).

FIGURE 10

LEVEL OF SUPPORT FOR GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT OF COMPETENCY- BASED PROGRAMS

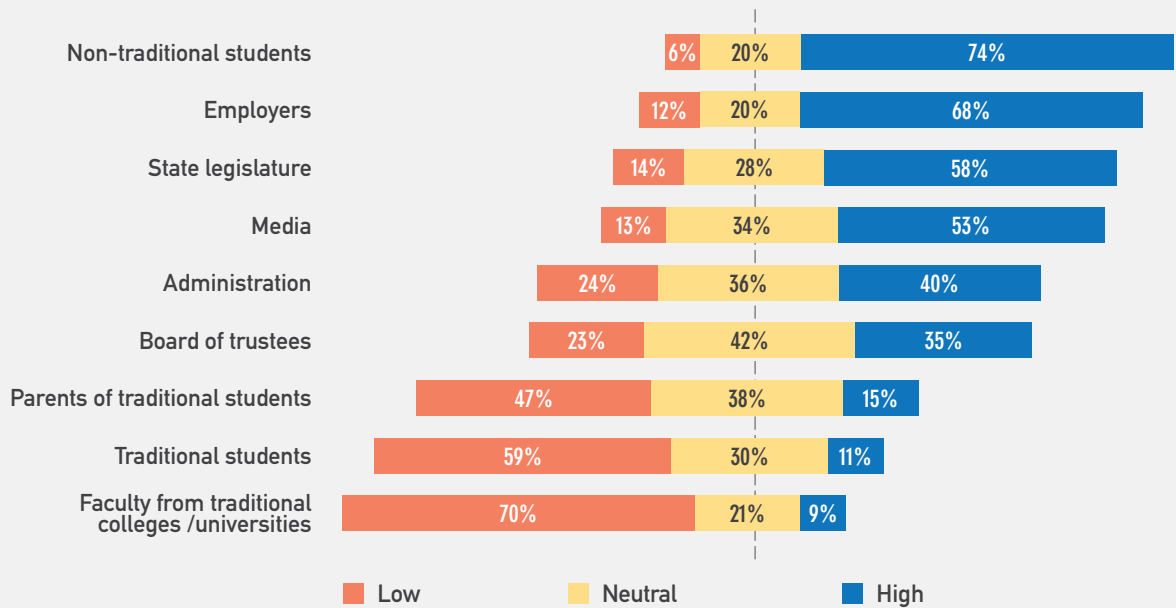
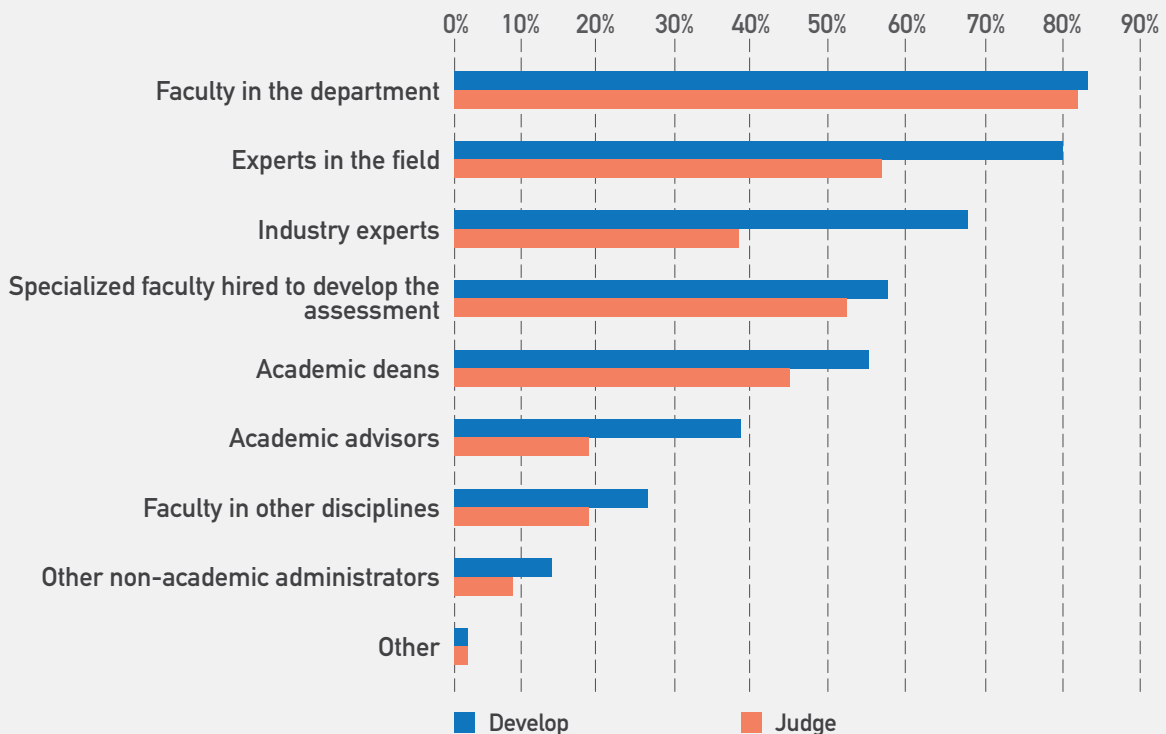


FIGURE 11

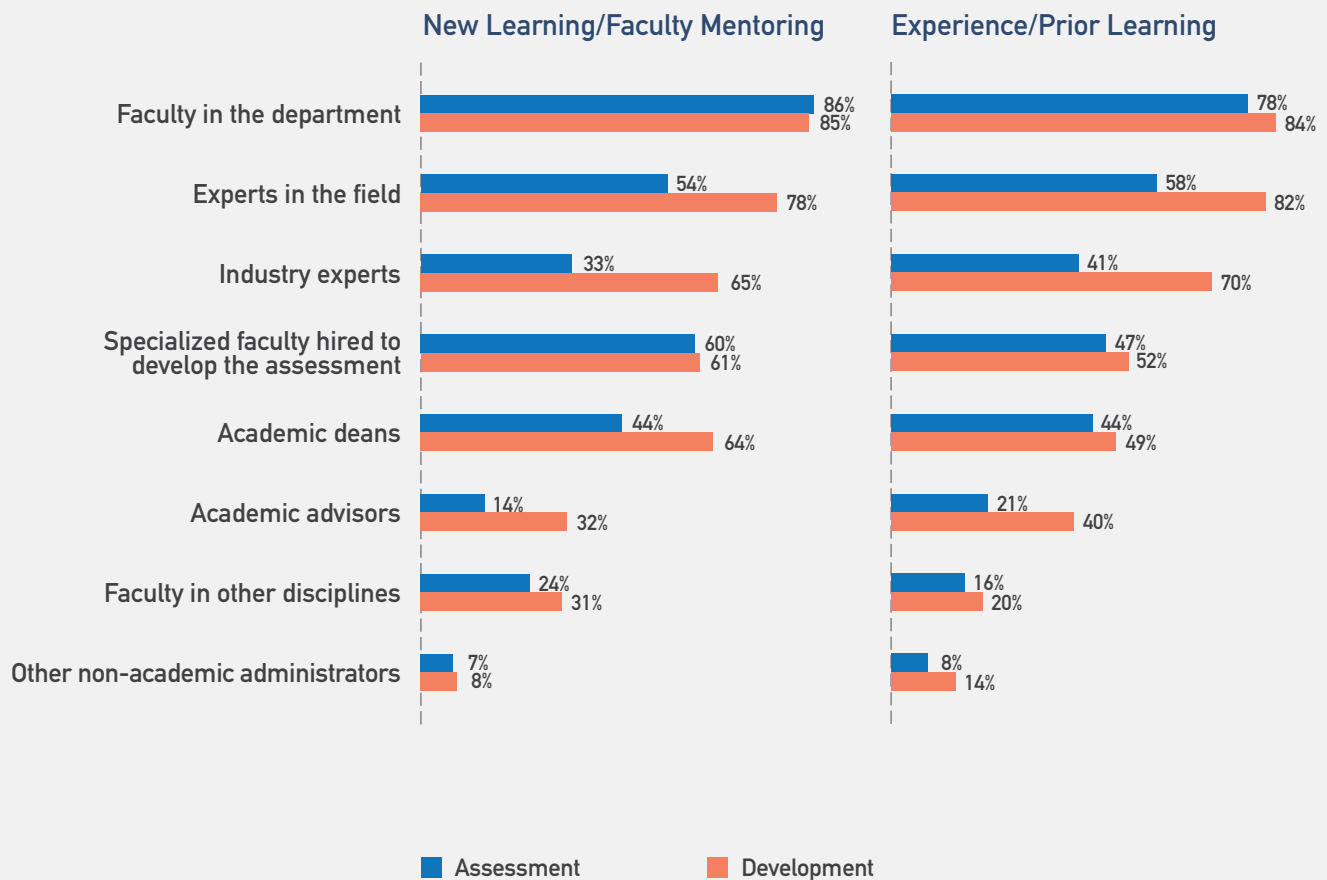
CONSTITUENCIES WHO SHOULD PARTICIPATE IN DETERMINING ASSESSMENT CRITERIA AND JUDGING COMPETENCY PROGRAMS



Presidents who defined competency-based education as assessments of new learning were more likely to say that a wider array of faculty and staff on campus should have a role in determining assessment criteria, while their counterparts who defined competency-based learning as prior knowledge were more likely to support outside experts in the development of programs (see Figure 12).

FIGURE 12

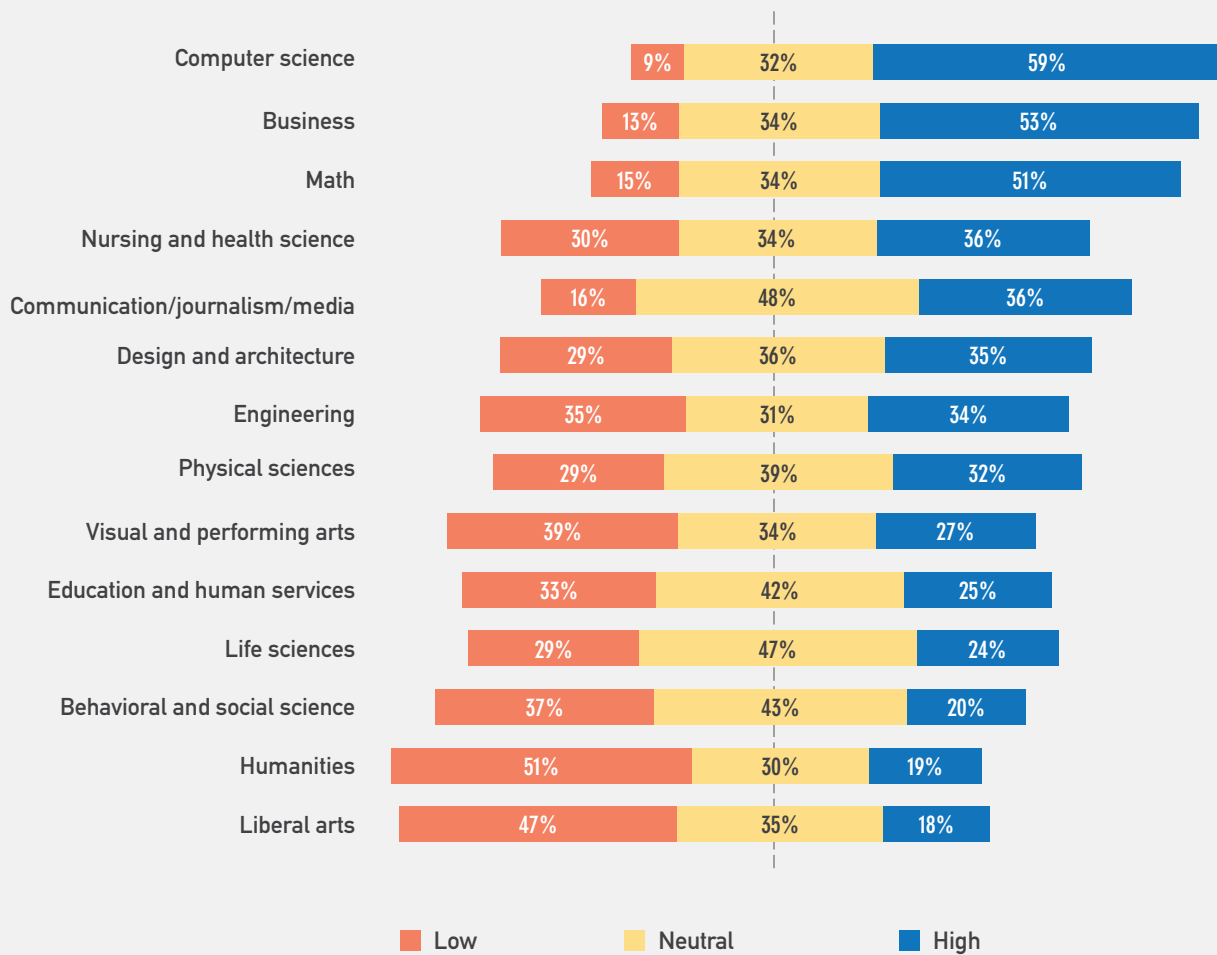
CONSTITUENCIES, WHO SHOULD PARTICIPATE IN DEVELOPING AND ASSESSING COMPETENCY-BASED PROGRAMS, BY RESPONDENT VIEWPOINT



Not all fields lend themselves to the development of competency-based programs, according to the survey. Presidents were most positive on the future for competency-based degrees in professional fields with easily defined outcomes, such as computer science, business, and math, and less enthused about disciplines like behavioral and social sciences, the humanities, and the liberal arts (see Figure 13).

FIGURE 13

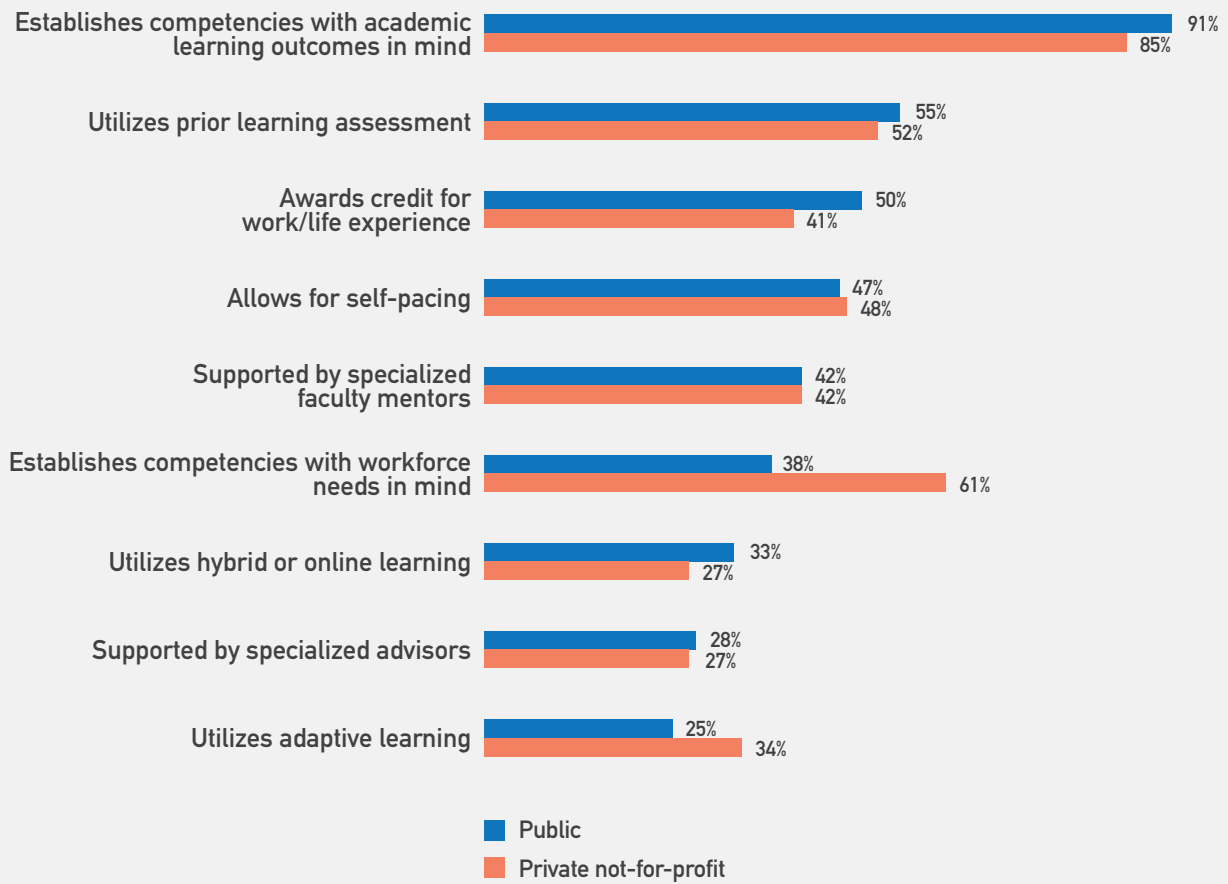
LEVEL OF DIFFICULTY IN DEVELOPING ASSESSMENTS BY ACADEMIC FIELD



No matter the field, however, presidents agreed that learning outcomes, rather than new learning technologies or new advising structures, should be at the forefront when developing new programs (see Figure 14).

FIGURE 14

ATTITUDES ON LEARNING OUTCOMES OF COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION



CONCLUSION

Competency-based education models have the potential to remake higher education and offer a new path to a degree for the millions of Americans who have some college, but no degree. But before such programs hit the mainstream of higher education, there needs to be more agreement on the definition of competency-based education and a better understanding of who benefits from this new measure of learning.

Nonetheless, presidents remain overwhelmingly positive on competency-based education, especially when faced with a deluge of new ideas on how to change their centuries-old business and educational delivery models. According to The Chronicle survey, they see a large role for faculty members, who have for the most part felt left out of the current discussions about disruptive innovation in higher education. They also see a role in better connecting higher education to the workforce by involving employers in developing the competencies needed to award credit in a different way.

Perhaps the biggest hurdle to competency-based education remains tradition. The credit hour has been at the foundation of American higher education since the beginning of the 20th century. Changing how we measure the passage of time in higher education and assess student learning will not be easy, but the fact that college presidents mostly are positive on a potential replacement should give supporters of competency-based education some hope for the future.

METHODOLOGY

The results of *A New Measure for Collegiate Learning: What Presidents Think About the Promises and Pitfalls of Competency-Based Education* are based on responses of presidents at private, not-for-profit four-year and public four-year institutions that fall into a selected group of classifications developed by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. Maguire Associates, of Concord, MA, which conducted the online survey for The Chronicle, invited a random sample of college presidents to respond. Of those invited, 188 responded. The data collection took place in April 2015.



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