

A Self-paced, Competency-Based Model for Learning
Proof-of-Concept Proposal
Bainbridge State College

Project Lead

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Project Category

Proof of Concept/New Models for Learning

Overview of Project

We propose to make an entire certificate available in a modularized, self-paced form. The five courses in the Small Business Management certificate will be divided into competencies and modules, and the learning activities for them developed in an online environment. Students in the program will complete modules at their own pace. This competency-based approach will allow students to receive credit for modules for which they already have competency by completing the module assessment at any time. Students will also be able to work through the learning activities for a given competency and take the assessment whenever they are ready. This approach will enable some students to progress more quickly through the certificate. Perhaps more importantly, this approach puts the responsibility for learning in the hands of students, and therefore, provides motivation and a sense of control over their progression through the program. In addition, the content of the program will be developed using as many open educational resources as possible with the goal of reducing or completely eliminating the extra cost of textbooks for the certificate.

Impact on Completion

There is a growing interest in higher education with models of learning that allow students to move at their own pace; to gain credit for prior learning; and to take more responsibility for their own learning. All of these approaches are believed to increase student motivation and persistence to completion and to reduce the amount of time it takes to complete a program. The approach described in our project addresses all of these goals. The ultimate aim of our project is to increase the number of students completing the program successfully and reduce barriers to completion by offering opportunities for prior learning assessment, the ability for students to move at their own pace, and flexibility in when and how students learn. In addition, because the certificate is embedded in an AAS, students will be well on their way to another credential.

Potential Lessons to be Learned

Completion of this project will provide the college, and other USG institutions, with important trial-and-error information about developing modularized, competency-based instruction and the various administrative, pedagogical, and student management issues to be solved. Whatever the outcome of the project, there is much to be learned about how to proceed with similar projects on our campus or any campus in the USG system.

Area of need and defined potential impact on completion

The majority of students at Bainbridge State College tend to be non-traditional, older students (58%), who come to the college with tremendous demands on their time and little tolerance for some of the hoops students have to jump through when working toward a degree. The proposed project directly addresses both of these issues by offering a program that is flexible in the amount of time needed to devote to it in a given week or semester and offers the opportunity to progress more quickly through it by allowing self-paced work. It also allows students to complete modules at any time by demonstrating competence through module assessments. This design provides an opportunity for those who already have competencies to move more quickly and efficiently through the program. In addition, business-related occupations were identified as our most pronounced area of need in a 2012 assessment of our region by our consulting firm, MGT of America, Inc.

The pilot, if successful, will not only decrease time to completion and increase persistence for students in the certificate, but perhaps more importantly, it will provide valuable information for expanding such an approach into other programs in the college. Ultimately, the widespread use of this self-paced, competency-based approach could result in a fundamental shift in course delivery and improved learning and completion rates.

Connection to the Campus Completion Plan

This initiative directly supports our institution's Complete College Georgia plan. The second goal in our plan is to "improve college access and completion for students traditionally underserved in postsecondary education." Moving toward a modular, competency-based approach for the certificate program provides an opportunity to serve all students, but especially underserved non-traditional students. The flexibility offered by the program should appeal to this population of students and allow them a route to more quickly and effectively earn a college credential.

The ability to complete college more efficiently also ties into our third CCG goal: shorten time to degree. As mentioned in our CCG report, a significant number of BSC students change majors frequently, contributing to a delay in their graduation. A stepwise, modular, competency-based approach makes sense in helping students see a clear path to completion.

BSC's CCG plan also calls for us to restructure instructional delivery. Restructuring each of the courses in this certificate into modules with competency-based assessments is a significant step toward achieving our goal. Based on a survey we conducted in spring 2009 of 357 non-returning students who were first-time, full-time students for fall 2008, 17% of those students responded that being a single parent with childcare responsibilities prevented them from returning to college. Indeed, research shows that single parents have only a 5% chance of completing a degree in five to eight years. Offering students flexible parameters to earn a certificate will give them the opportunity to more quickly enter the workforce or advance in their current job. This certificate is also embedded in a degree which means completing the program will give them a marketable credential and that they will be that much closer to completing the AAS.

Theory of change and/or illustrated logic model

Assumptions. Among the assumptions we are making in this project is that students will take more ownership of learning when they have more control over the learning process. Presenting a learning experience as a set of competencies to be mastered--rather than a list of courses to be completed--puts learning more in the hands of students. They understand the rationale behind learning when they see a set of competencies to be mastered that they can complete on their own timeline. Furthermore, since some

students already have competence in some of these areas, the ability to demonstrate that competence and move on to the next module should add to their sense of control over their learning and motivation for completing the series. Offering opportunities for this kind of prior learning assessment is at the forefront of national efforts to enable adult learners to complete college degrees.

By organizing the certificate into a set of clear competencies, we believe the certificate itself will be strengthened. The process of developing competencies requires a thoughtful and thorough review of the student learning outcomes for each course and the certificate as a whole; by doing so, it helps course designers develop learning experiences that more effectively help students achieve learning goals. This approach should lead, therefore, to better-designed courses and improved student learning outcomes.

Ability to complete the project. There are several factors that contribute to our belief that we can complete this project successfully within the prescribed time frame. First, we are applying this learning model to a small certificate program. The number of courses, faculty, and students involved is small enough to easily manage this significant change but large enough to provide useful feedback on the viability of this approach with other programs. Second, because we are a relatively small institution, it is easier for us to gather all the resources necessary from around campus to devise and complete the project than it is for larger institutions. Third, with the resources we have in place--several faculty members committed to the project; our distance learning department; and other administrative supports--we believe that we have the ability to complete this project within the allotted time. The only resource we need that we do not currently have is instructional design assistance as well as funding to implement the project. Our proposed budget, however, will allow us to contract with an external instructional designer to assist with the project and buyout faculty time.

Potential for lessons learned and models for other institutions

There are numerous issues to be resolved in getting this model to work and much to be learned about the approach from a pedagogical point of view. Among these are how to manage financial aid issues, registration methods, course load management, and student support issues. We also need to discover whether or not this approach actually leads to increased learning and rates of completion and persistence by students. By completing the pilot in the coming year, we will be able to test approaches to each variable and provide data and qualitative answers to these questions. If the pilot is successful, the model--including our approaches to registration and course management--should be relatively easily replicated at other institutions.

Project Plan

How it would work for students. The content of each course will be created in our online course management system. Students will access each course online and work through the module content at their own pace. Faculty in the small business management program will have established hours each week in which they will be in a classroom lab on campus. Students can come to the lab to ask questions or get assistance as needed during those times. They may also use those lab hours to come in and complete assessments for modules whether those be tests or authentic, competency-based assessments. When they complete a module assessment, they move on to the next module.

Long-term goals. The objective of this project is to create a learning model in which students take ownership of their own learning by recognizing and working toward concrete competencies in a self-paced program of study. This approach, we believe, will result in greater student persistence toward completion and at an increased rate. Key indicators of success include the following:

Goal	Indicators of success
Successful conversion of courses into competencies and modules	All courses converted to meaningful, clear competencies
Students' rate of progression through modules and competencies	Students progress through the certificate at least as quickly as the traditional model
Students master competencies	Students complete competencies with grades equivalent to or greater than student grades in traditional courses.
Retention rate of the certificate students	Students are retained in the program at a rate at least as high as the traditional model
	Students report satisfaction with the model

One of the benefits of revising the courses in this project as competency-based is that instructors and course designers will have a better understanding of what students actually need to learn and how they will learn it. The process of revising the courses will illuminate those areas of current course design that are not contributing to the desired student learning outcomes.

PHASE	DATES	DESCRIPTION
Phase 1 Project Planning	July 1 to August 1, 2013	During this time, the details for administering the program, registering students, and granting credit and financial aid will be planned. Some of this work will carry on into the fall. Faculty will also begin work on developing the competencies and assessments for all courses in the project.
Phase 2 Course Development	Fall semester, 2013	In this phase, faculty continue developing competencies and the instructional designer--in collaboration with faculty--develops materials for the online component of the courses.
Phase 3 Project Launch	Spring semester, 2014	The certificate is launched.
Phase 4 Project Evaluation	Spring/summer, 2014	Evaluation will be ongoing throughout the certificate and will conclude with a summative assessment in the summer of 2014.

Project Evaluation

The project will be evaluated primarily on the basis of data collected for four of our five indicators of success:

Objective	Measurement
Students progress through the certificate at least as quickly as the traditional model	Among students in the program, the percentage of work completed toward the certificate as compared to students enrolled in the same length of time in the past three years.
Students complete competencies with grades equivalent to or greater than student grades in past courses.	Grade comparisons between cohorts in the program versus those in the same courses in the last three years.
Students are retained in the program at a rate at least as high as the traditional model	Rate of retention between program cohort and students in the certificate program in the last three years.
Students report satisfaction with the model	Student survey to be completed each semester for those in the program.