

COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION





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WGU's History with Competency-Based Education



- Western Governors University **was founded in 1997 by the governors of 19 Western states** to provide high-quality, affordable degree programs in high-demand, high-growth occupations, with a particular focus on **meeting the needs of underserved populations.**
- An **accredited, non-profit** university, WGU is based on an **innovative competency-based education model** that provides a student-centered Community of Care with a full suite of wrap-around support services and specialized faculty.



Basics of Competency-Based Education

- Definition
- Structure
- Characteristics
- Measuring Learning, not Time

Competency-based education is a respected model of education that offers education to individuals by measuring learning rather than time.

It does two things...

- It gives each learner time to learn.
- It provides a way to assure there has been learning because the learner must meet set competencies within a course or program, proving mastery of knowledge and skills.

Competency-based education (CBE) awards academic credit based on mastery of clearly defined competencies.

- *Educause*

(7 Things you Should Know)

Competencies are developed for the different programs reflecting the knowledge and skills that graduates will need to have mastered to succeed in the workforce of today and tomorrow.

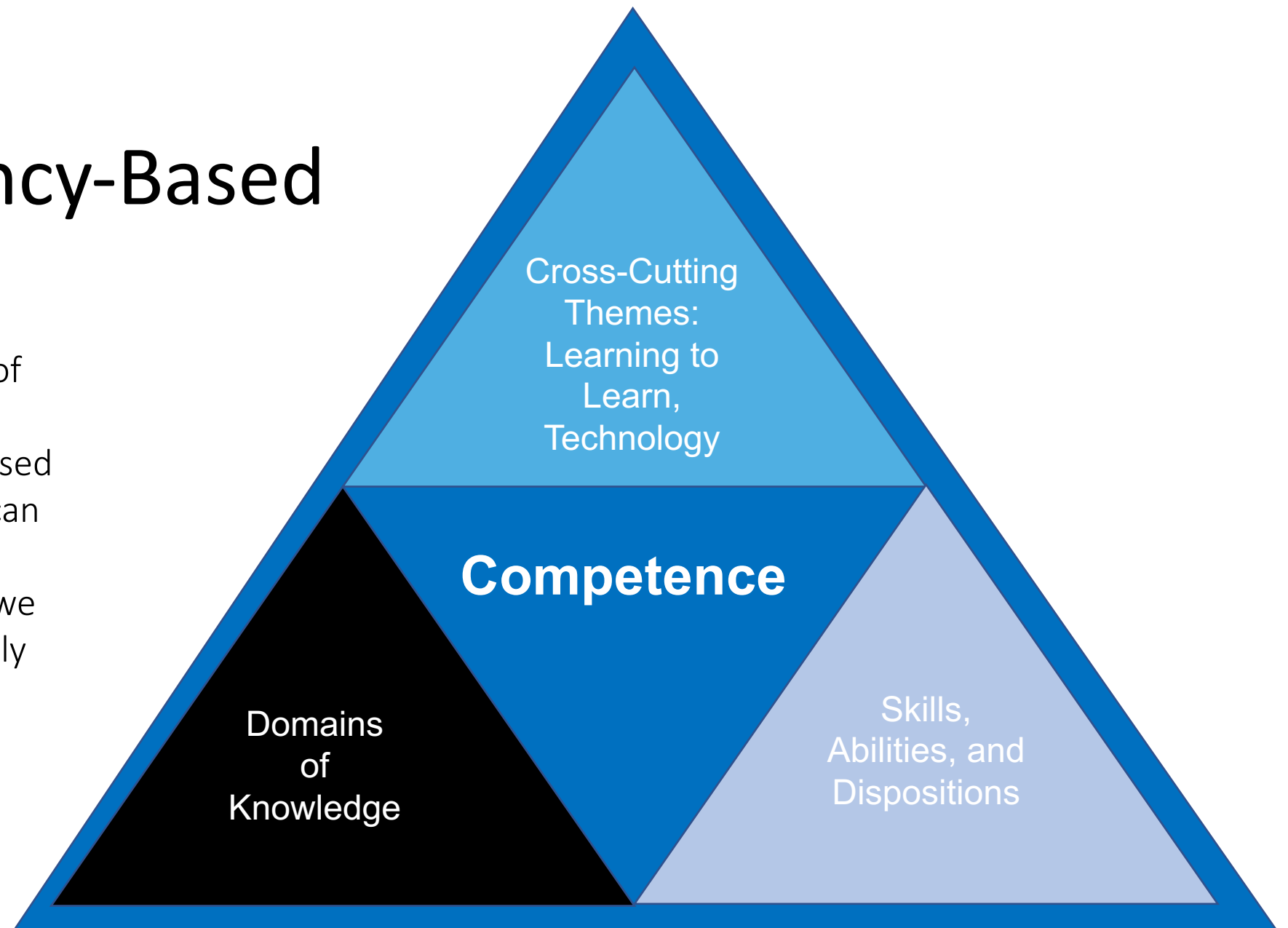
Competencies are based on real-world standards by aligning with corporate or education leaders and conducting independent research.



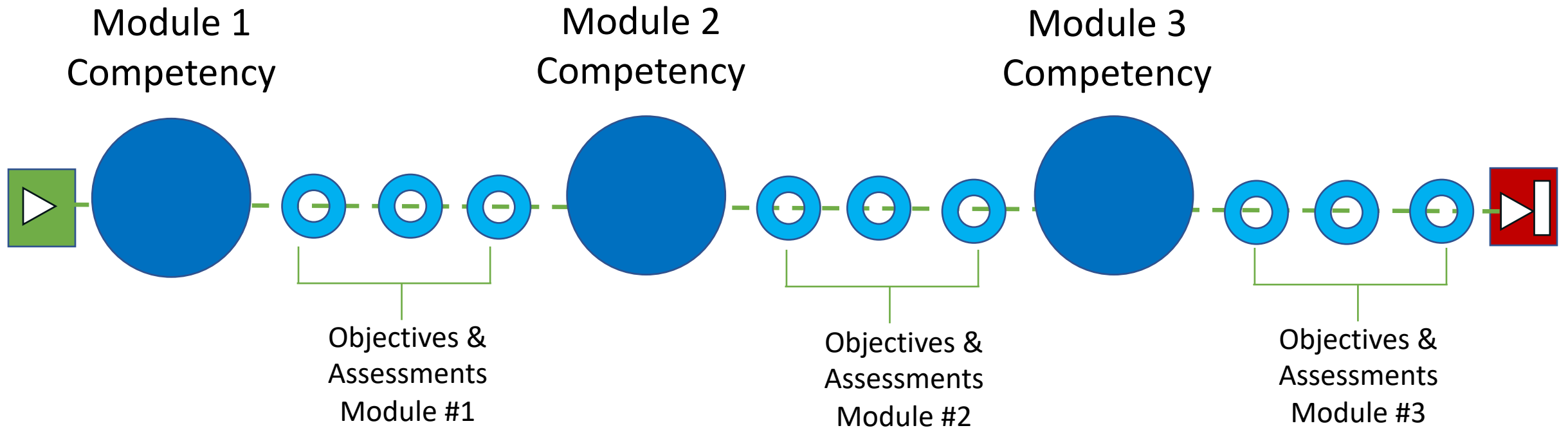
Structure of Competency-Based Education

“I’ve worked in many kinds of educational settings, and I believe that competency-based education is a way that we can assure our students are learning – and in ways that we cannot measure as effectively in traditional higher education.”

– Dr. Verna Lowe



Measuring Learning Not Time



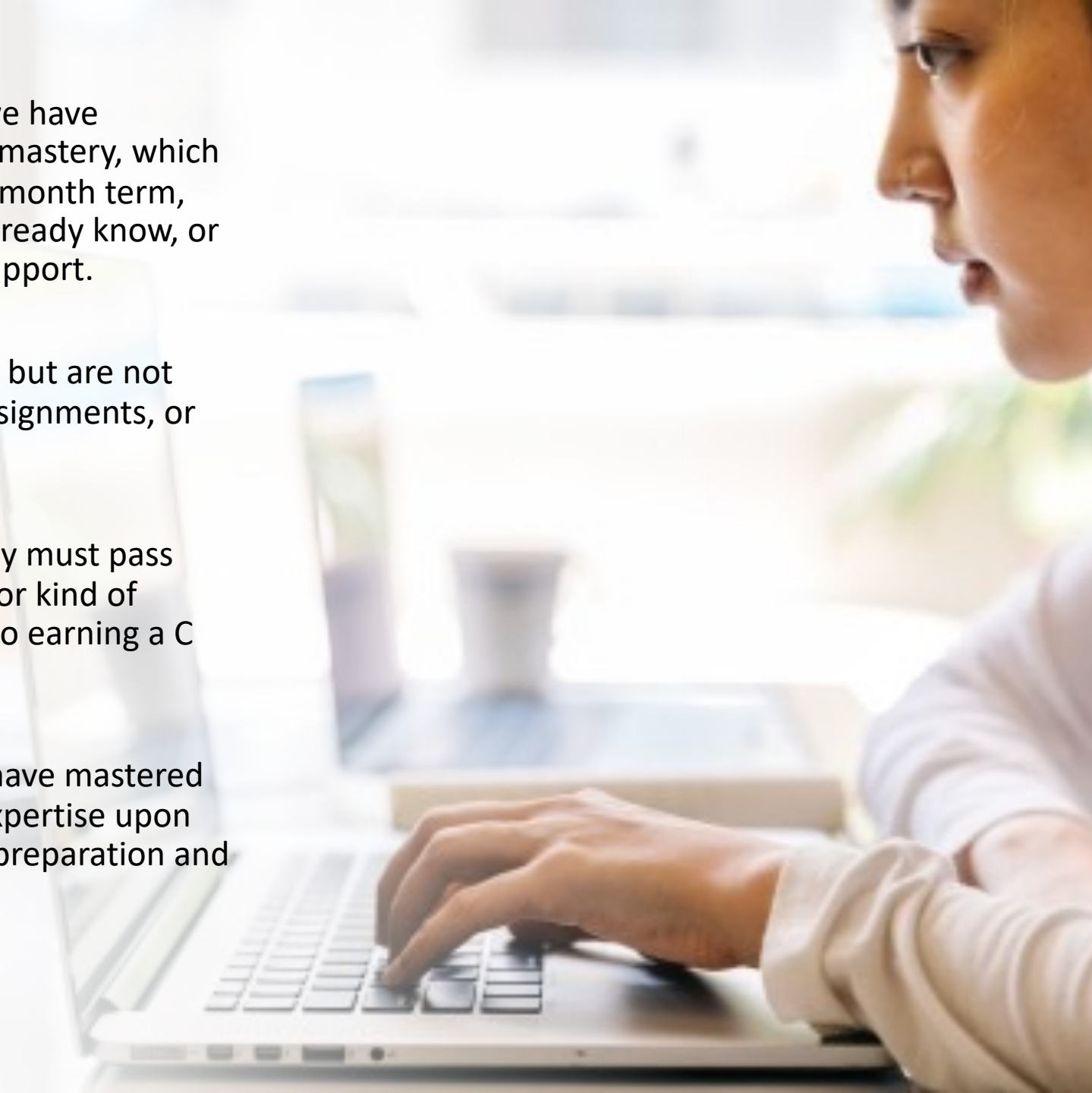
Student A may complete this range in three weeks and
Student B may take six weeks to complete.

For each of the competencies within the course, we have designed objectives and assessments to measure mastery, which the student takes when they're ready. Within the six-month term, students may speed up through curriculum they already know, or slow down when they need additional time and support.

Assessments can take many forms and can include but are not limited to objective assessments, project-based assignments, or performance tasks.

In CBE models students do not receive grades. They must pass each assessment. They can't "kind of understand, or kind of know" a competency or topic as a student might do earning a C grade, for example.

They keep working on the competency until they have mastered it, then they move on. This assures learning and expertise upon graduation. This is especially relevant in educator preparation and healthcare programs.



Critical Characteristics of CBE

Course or Direct Assessment

Explicit Program and Course Competencies

Competencies Based on Real-World Industry Standards and Labor Market Needs

Standardized Programs, Courses, and Assessments –Cannot Vary by Instructor

Flexible Time Frame to Mastery

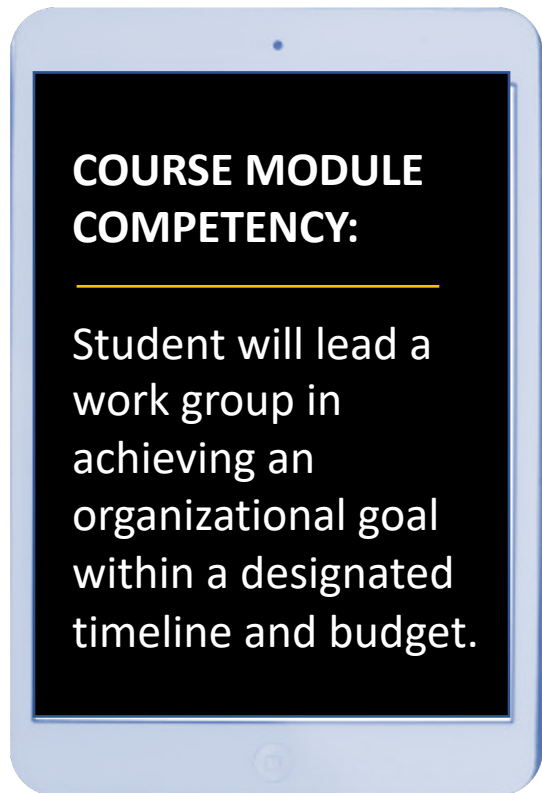
Adaptable Programs with Learning Resources and Use of Prior Knowledge

Completion is Demonstrated by Competence on the Outcomes

Flexible, not Self-Paced

Flexible time frame to mastery does not necessarily mean self-paced. At WGU, for example, students have flexible scheduling and the ability to accelerate or slow down within each term but must maintain "on-time progress" to be eligible for federal financial aid.

Competency and an Example Assessment



Assessment or Performance Tasks are based on Area of Study and Relevance to Workforce Needs:

Education Performance Task: Student will lead a group of teachers evaluating the school's curriculum.

Health Performance Task: Student will lead a committee of nurses to develop new patient protocols.

Business Performance Task: Student will manage a sales team to increase market share in a given region.

Source: Bral, C. and Cunningham, J. (2016). Foundations of quality in competency-based programs: Competencies and assessments. Wiley Online Library, 1:118-121

Rigorous Psychometrics

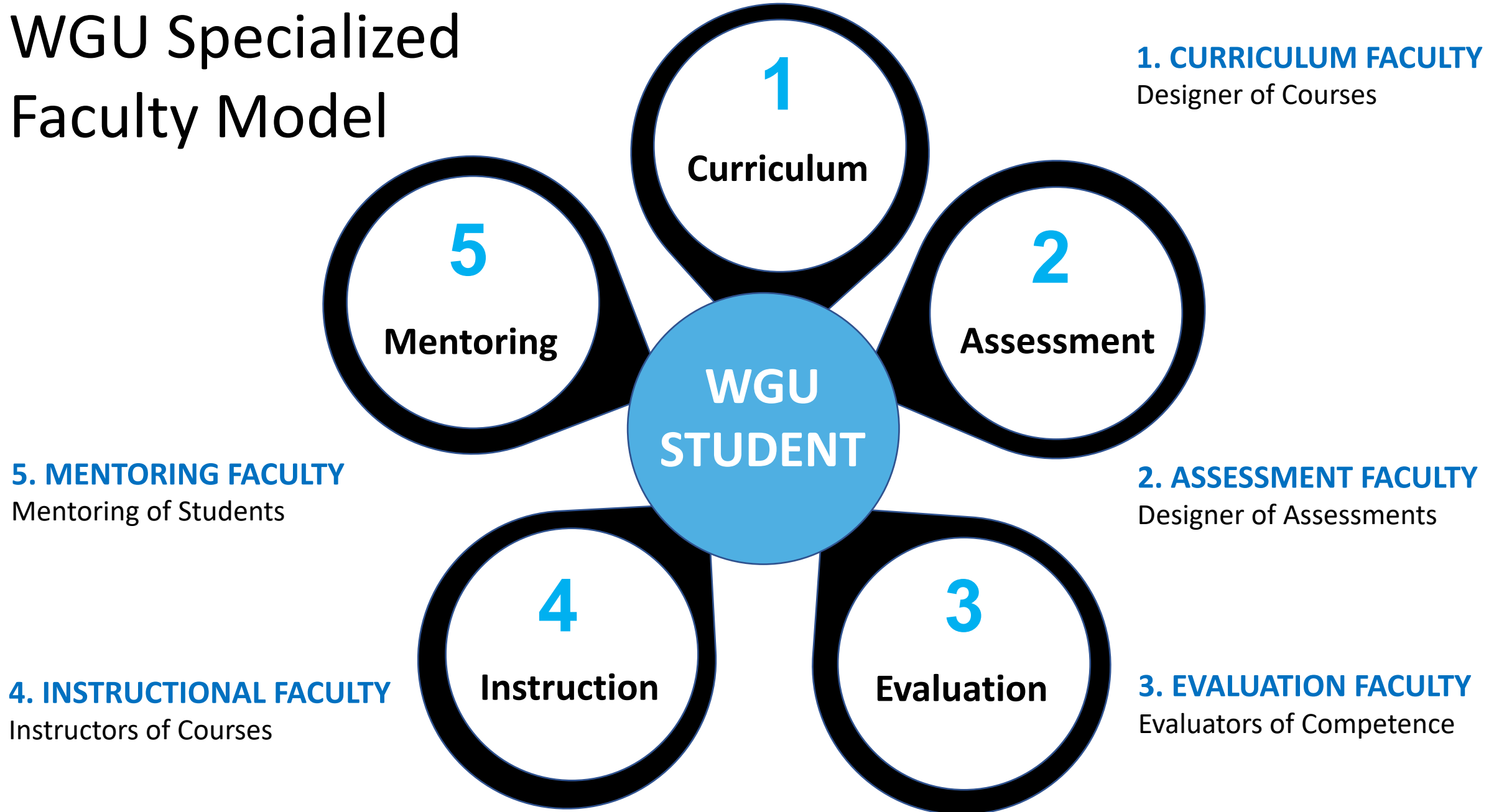
Because progression is based on competency, not seat time, the assessment and evaluation process in competency-based education is critical.

We go through rigorous psychometrics to assure there is an appropriate assessment for each of the competencies we are measuring.

One of the earliest assessments that's very interesting and helpful is the **Prior Learning Assessment**. The student can take this at the start of the course so faculty can see what the student already knows and help them focus their time and energy on the acquisition of the remaining new knowledge and skills.

At WGU these are part of each student's **Personalized Learning Guide** which is an individualized guide designed exclusively for that individual student and their degree plan.

WGU Specialized Faculty Model



About each Faculty Role

The approach to competency-based education at WGU involves a unique specialized faculty model. There are five essential faculty roles, and the roles do not overlap.

1. Curriculum Faculty – these experts design the courses and ensure a master curriculum is in place. They introduce knowledge and skills that will be relevant in the workplace for the graduate of that program. This work is based on research provided by the program team, including assessing what skills and knowledge are needed in the workforce, as well as from interviews with corporate and education partners. In addition, for any educator preparation program key standards are in place that must be addressed as the master curriculum is developed.

2. Assessment Faculty – these faculty members design the assessments to prove there has been learning for each of the competencies, with critical attention paid to assuring the learning can be consistently and accurately measured. These faculty decide what type of assessment is best to use in each case. In a business course, the student may have a performance task to build a sales presentation, whereas in a healthcare setting it may be reporting on a recommended procedure or best practice, and even use of virtual and augmented reality.

About each Faculty Role

Continued...

3. Evaluation Faculty – Unlike traditional education models where the course instructor also grades or assesses the tests and assignments, in the WGU model a separate team of experts assess and evaluate all student tasks and performance assignments. They offer students advice, point to additional resources, and base their work on a four-point rubric of being universally accurate, fair, helpful, and quick. Ensuring students get on-time feedback so they can progress as quickly as possible is critical to the student's success. Many of this team of faculty have terminal degrees and many have previous teaching experience in the area of expertise in which they are evaluating student assignments and tasks.

4. Instructors – these faculty lead the course and help students navigate the curriculum and learning. Their role is much like of the traditional professor except that they only provide instruction, they do not assess learning. They work off a master curriculum so all instructors teaching a specific course will use the same curriculum for that course, ensuring quality and fairness. The faculty at WGU generally have a Ph.D. or Ed.D. In addition to providing classroom instruction, the instructors engage 1:1 with students as each student needs so that they can gain mastery of the knowledge and skills tied to each competency. They also can steer students to additional resources in the Community of Care and Student Success Center.

About each Faculty Role

Continued...

5. Mentors – Key to the WGU model is the student-mentor relationship. This faculty member serves as a guide for the student throughout that student's journey. In general, a specific mentor is assigned to a specific student and stays with that student from their first course through graduation, building deep relationships that facilitate coaching, encouragement, and support. Mentors also help students schedule the demands of their busy lives, balancing work, family, and school. Students consistently comment on the critical role the mentor played in helping them stay focused and on purpose to reach their goals. Mentors meet weekly or biweekly based on each student's needs. The mentor also provides a safe place for the student to express concerns about certain course topics. Mentors can direct them to a vast array of support services in the WGU Community of Care. At WGU, the mentor is core to our model and is often referred to as the guide by the side.





Benefits of CBE for students

- Flexible pacing – within federal financial aid criteria
- Personalized learning
- Students can leverage prior knowledge
- Accelerate or slow down within the six-month term based on knowledge and skills
- Focus on learning not seat time – alleviates stress
- Flat rate tuition – pay per term not per course
- Students can learn from anywhere there is Internet
- 360° Support from a mentor and the Community of Care

Benefits of CBE for institutions

- Increase student success
- Serve new student populations
- Authentic learning experiences
- Lower cost at scale
- Embedded process of continuous improvement and data analytics:
 - Retention
 - Graduation rates
 - Pacing
 - Course Engagement
 - On-time progress and time to completion
- Can pivot and adjust to best meet market or student needs



A close-up photograph of a person's hands interacting with a tablet computer. The person is wearing a grey long-sleeved shirt. The background is a blurred wooden surface.

Agility and Relevance

Built properly, competency-based education allows the institution to adjust to changing populations.

For many years at WGU, our median age student was 36-years-old, identified as female, had some college but no degree, and worked at least part-time if not full-time.

Today we are seeing a significant influx of younger, first-time, full-time students. Because of the personalized nature of competency-based education, we can adjust to meet that student where they are and help them get where they need to go. A suite of services and scaffolding can be deployed, as needed, based on the individual.

Myth #1



TRUE



FALSE

Competency-based education can only be used in areas with specific, demonstrable skills, so it's not relevant in traditional higher education areas such as the liberal arts.

Sometimes people limit concepts for competency-based education because of the term “skills.” Competency based education is based on demonstrating mastery of knowledge and skills. In any course there are things you want the student to learn. Those are the competencies. The curriculum designer and assessment teams determine how to measure and assess learning that proves mastery of those competencies. All subject matters can be relevant in competency-based education because all courses can be designed in a way that causes the learner to demonstrate knowledge and learning of the competency.

Myth #2



TRUE



FALSE

In competency-based education there are no courses or faculty. The student simply takes assessments.

As noted earlier, curriculum is meticulously researched and developed in a way to ensure student engagement and learning. A team of faculty are available to each student, including 1:1 assistance to address any gaps or challenges. When the WGU teacher preparation programs began working with initial licensure requirements across all 50 states, this misconception first came to light. While students can accelerate through material they already know, the courses are rigorous, the content extensive and thoughtfully curated and created, and the faculty experts are deeply engaged.



Myth #3



TRUE



FALSE

The faculty in competency-based education models tend to be less credentialed than in traditional university models.

The faculty at WGU are highly-credentialed and in the School of Education, most have Ed.D. or Ph.D. credentials and prior teaching experience. Many come to us from traditional universities settings because they are intrigued by the model. In addition to our regional accreditation, our teacher preparation programs have the prestigious dual accreditation of CAEP (Council for Accreditation of Educator Preparation) and AAQEP (Association for Advancing Quality in Educator Preparation) , something that would be impossible were our faculty not as highly qualified as they are.

Myth #4

The model does not legitimately prepare students to be teachers because the program is fully online.

☐ TRUE
☒ FALSE

False indeed! Our degrees that prepare future educators for initial licensure require face-to-face classroom demonstration teaching and other clinicals, also called student teaching. We work with more than 2,800 districts across the U.S. each comprising huge numbers of schools, in order to have quality classrooms in which to place our students for their student teaching assignment. We work to ensure students are placed near their home, wherever in the U.S. that may be, and we have highly regarded models in place to assess their teaching experience. Today, the WGU Teachers College has an alumni network of more than 70,000 working educators in schools and classrooms across all 50 states.

Advice to institutions getting started

While competency-based education can be efficient, effective, and highly successful, establishing a CBE program is not easy. It will require restructuring your existing models.

A few of many considerations follow below:

- ✓ Stable and strong leadership
- ✓ Determine your CBE model and delivery system
- ✓ Engage faculty at the beginning and throughout
- ✓ Find faculty willing to adopt a new faculty model
- ✓ Establish change management practices
- ✓ Determine if you can start small with a program
- ✓ Define and validate industry-accepted competencies
- ✓ Build and scale student support services
- ✓ Ensure flexibility within term limits if you want to maintain an ability for students to receive federal aid
- ✓ Build new pricing model – by term not credit hour
- ✓ Move away from grades and time as measures
- ✓ Establish your data systems and how you will learn from them.

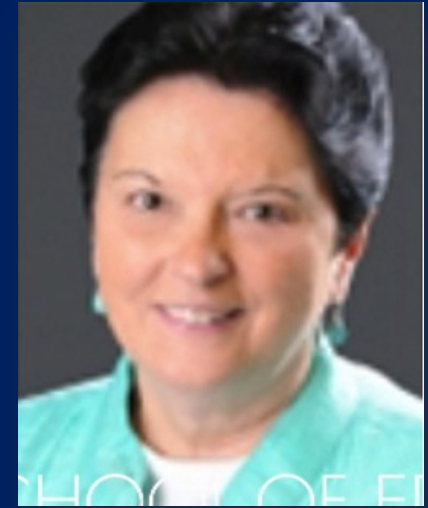


Bottom Line

Competency-based education models are not easy to build. The hard work is worth it because when done correctly the model will benefit the students, the institutions, the faculty and staff, and the employers who hire the graduates.

About the Author of this CBE Overview

At WGU, Dr. Verna Lowe leads compliance and accreditation work for educator preparation programs. Previously, she developed and modeled a support program for students with learning disabilities (SPSLD) in addition to teaching and serving as a school psychologist. Lowe is an author and co-author of numerous publications in professional journals and has been a highly acclaimed speaker, seminar presenter, and panel member at professional conferences across the United States.



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