Beyond Credentials

How Colleges Can Help Students Gain and Signal Competencies That Are Valuable to Employers

Molly M. Scott, Lauren Eyster, Christian Collins, Semhar Gebrekristos, and Yipeng Su

Competencies are the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed for particular jobs.

Competency-based approaches in postsecondary education can include ways to

1. adapt curriculum so that it delivers and measures in-demand competencies, and/or

2. improve the signaling of competencies to employers.

Colleges, universities, and training programs can support systems change toward **a competency-based approach** by tracking students' labor-market outcomes, analyzing which competencies are needed to succeed, and building the evidence base.

Postsecondary institutions can **find support for their pioneering efforts** by engaging in communities of practice and tapping existing tools and resources.

Sixty percent of Americans have had some postsecondary education or training. Often, that education or training leads to a credential, such as a college degree, certificate, or professional license or certification, intended help job seekers signal their knowledge to employers. But that signaling functioned better decades ago, when credentialing was simpler and fewer people continued their studies after high school.

Now, with some 738,000 unique credentials in the US, employers are having a harder time understanding the value and meaning of each credential and whether the person who holds it is right for the job. Students also need a better way to communicate what they have learned in terms that employers value and recognize.

One solution gaining ground is using competencies (rather than credentials) as "currency" in the labor market. Competencies are the knowledge, skills, and abilities students gain from their education, training, and experience and that employers need for particular jobs. Focusing on competencies clarifies the link between education and work. And students who do not graduate or who do not want to be pigeonholed by their degrees can still get value out of their coursework by communicating their competencies rather than their credentials.

STEPS POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION AND TRAINING PROVIDERS CAN TAKE

Moving toward a competency-based system, however, is not easy. But many postsecondary education and training providers are already piloting competency-based approaches, such as mapping competencies to curriculums and bolstering traditional transcripts with information about job skills.

Through interviews with more than 20 experts who are testing ways to build competencies into postsecondary systems, we identified several steps that colleges can take to support competency-based approaches.

1. Use labor-market outcome data to make decisions. Knowing more about jobs and earnings after their studies helps students better understand the return on investment of their education and training. Colleges can track labor-market outcomes for their programs and consult data on debt and earnings from the US Department of Education's College Scorecard or from state longitudinal systems, if

available. They can then use those data to update their curriculum and work with employers to ensure programs align with workforce needs.

2. Understand employers' workforce needs. Knowing how curriculum and learning objectives align with job descriptions can help colleges and other training providers hone in the competencies students need for success. Some colleges use proprietary job-listing data to identify needed competencies and validate them with local employers. Colleges can also work with their state labor-market information office to better understand their local labor markets when creating competency-based programs.

3. Build evidence on competency-based approaches. Perhaps the clearest way to make a strong case for competency-based approaches is to demonstrate their comparative advantages in achieving student outcomes such as retention, completion, job placement, and earnings. Colleges pioneering competency-based approaches should evaluate their early efforts to help build an evidence base and share lessons learned with students, parents, and policymakers.

4. Engage in communities of practice. Because competency-based approaches are fairly new to many education and training providers, most of the people we interviewed said that they are starting from scratch in designing and implementing these efforts. College administrators, faculty, and staff engaging in this work can share promising practices, challenges, and lessons learned with other providers. The Competency-Based Education Network is a good place to start, but statewide opportunities for networking and resource sharing may also exist.

5. Use existing resources. Colleges and other providers do not need to start from scratch: many resources and tools exist to help providers build competencies into their systems. For example, the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment has a toolkit for mapping competencies. The National Network of Business and Industry Associations has developed a framework of foundational skills and competencies needed to succeed in the workplace.

That network, in partnership with the Creating IT Futures Foundation, has also developed a framework of information technology employability skills and competencies. The Lumina Foundation has launched a beta version of a Connecting Credentials Framework, which connects credentials to what recipients should know and be able to do using a common language, allowing for comparability across credentials. And the Urban Institute is developing National Occupational Frameworks to identify job functions and competencies that meet the needs of employers who sponsor apprentices. Once the competencies are reviewed and validated by employers, the framework will be open source.

6. Identify data solutions. Colleges and other training providers face many practical and technical challenges to tracking and communicating competencies. Program staff and faculty can work with registrars to explore how integrated data systems might help track competencies and communicate them to employers and other educational institutions.