Evaluating Competency-Based Education

Introduction

Institutions may offer competency-based education (CBE) in a variety of formats and circumstances.

HLC defines CBE to mean education that is organized around competencies and requires students to demonstrate mastery of competencies.

There are two types of CBE programs:

- credit-based competency-based education program
- direct assessment competency-based education program

Depending on the circumstances, an institution may need to obtain HLC approval to begin offering a CBE program. In other situations, HLC notification is required to begin offering a CBE program.

As applicable, an institution's CBE program offerings will also be regularly reviewed as part of an institution's ongoing accreditation evaluations.

These guidelines provide information to (1) assist institutions when initially seeking to offer, and then subsequently offering, a CBE program; and (2) assist peer reviewers when evaluating an application from an institution that is seeking to offer, or when evaluating an institution that is then subsequently offering, a CBE program.

The guidelines include examples of relevant evidence that can be used by institutions to demonstrate compliance with HLC requirements in relationship to a CBE program.

Not all examples will be relevant in all circumstances. For example, the type of evidence that an institution would provide to demonstrate compliance with HLC requirements will differ depending on the type of CBE program (credit-based or direct assessment) that is being offered.

Additionally, it would not be possible for some evidence to be available until after a CBE program is in operation. Institutions that are seeking to offer a CBE program may use these examples to help guide their plans for the program and could, as applicable, provide evidence of their related plans and development. For example, an institution seeking to offer a CBE program could explain how it plans to review learning outcomes for the program in its substantive change application. If the program is approved, at its next comprehensive evaluation the institution could then provide evidence demonstrating how it implemented those plans for review of learning outcomes after the program was implemented.

The guidance and examples are not intended to be determinative or conclusive evidence of ongoing compliance with the Criteria for Accreditation. Additionally, evidence regarding other HLC requirements, such as the Assumed Practices, may also be applicable depending on the circumstances.

Related HLC Requirements

An institution must meet all HLC requirements in order to maintain accredited status. The following HLC requirements are most relevant to the issue of competency-based education programs:

Criteria for Accreditation

Criterion 1. Mission

The institution's mission is clear and articulated publicly; it guides the institution's operations.

1.A. Mission Alignment
The institution's educational programs, enrollment profile and scope of operations align with its publicly articulated mission.

Criterion 2. Integrity: Ethical and Responsible Conduct

In fulfilling its mission, the institution acts with integrity; its conduct is ethical and responsible.

2.B. Transparency
The institution presents itself accurately and completely to students and the public with respect to its educational programs and any claims it makes related to the educational experience.

Criterion 3. Teaching and Learning for Student Success

The institution demonstrates responsibility for the quality of its educational programs, learning environments and support services, and it evaluates their effectiveness in fulfilling its mission. The rigor and quality of each educational program is consistent regardless of modality, location or other differentiating factors.

3.A. Educational Programs
The institution maintains learning goals and outcomes that reflect a level of rigor commensurate with college-level work, including by program level and the content of each of its educational programs.

3.C. Sufficiency of Faculty and Staff
The institution has the faculty and staff needed for effective, high-quality programs and student services.

3.D. Support for Student Learning & Resources for Teaching
The institution provides student support services that address the needs of its student populations, as well as the teaching resources and infrastructure necessary for student success.

3.E. Assessment of Student Learning
The institution improves the quality of educational programs based on its assessment of student learning.

3.F. Program Review
The institution improves its curriculum based on periodic program review.

3.G. Student Success Outcomes
The institution's student success outcomes demonstrate continuous improvement, taking into account the student populations it serves and benchmarks that reference peer institutions.

Criterion 4. Sustainability: Institutional Effectiveness, Resources and Planning

The institution's resources, structures, policies, procedures and planning enable it to fulfill its mission, improve the quality of its educational programs, and respond to future challenges and opportunities.

4.A Effective Administrative Structures
The institution's administrative structures are effective and facilitate collaborative processes such as shared governance; data-informed decision-making; and engagement with internal and external constituencies as appropriate.

4.C. Planning for Quality Improvement
The institution engages in systematic strategic planning for quality improvement. It relies on data, integrating its insights from enrollment forecasts, financial capacity, student learning assessment, institutional operations and the external environment.

Assumed Practices

A. Integrity: Ethical and Responsible Conduct

15. The institution takes responsibility for the ethical and responsible behavior of its contractual partners in relation to actions taken on its behalf.

B. Teaching and Learning: Quality, Resources and Support

1. Programs, Courses and Credits

f. The institution has a clear policy on the maximum allowable credit for prior learning as a reasonable proportion of the credits required to complete the student's program. Credit awarded for prior learning is documented, evaluated and appropriate for the level of academic credential awarded. (Note that this requirement does not apply to courses transferred from other institutions.)

2. Faculty Roles and Qualifications

a. The institution establishes and maintains reasonable policies and procedures to determine that faculty are qualified. The factors that an institution considers as part of these policies and procedures could include, but are not limited to: the achievement of academic credentials, progress toward academic credentials, equivalent experience or some combination thereof. The institution's obligations in this regard extend to all instructors and all other entities to which it assigns the responsibility of instruction. HLC will maintain "Institutional Policies and Procedures for Determining Faculty Qualifications Guidelines" to further explain requirements for reasonable policies and procedures in accordance with this Assumed Practice.

b. Faculty participate substantially in:

i. Oversight of the curriculum offered — its development, vetting and implementation; academic substance; currency; and relevance for internal and external constituencies;

ii. Assurance of consistency in the level and quality of instruction and in the expectations of student performance;

iii. Establishment of the qualifications for instructors, including instructors provided by third parties;

iv. Analysis of data and appropriate action on assessment of student learning and program completion.

C. Teaching and Learning: Evaluation and Improvement

2. The institution evaluates all academic credit that it transcripts, including what it awards for experiential learning or other forms of prior learning. The institution has clear policies for evaluating and accepting credits awarded by other education providers and may rely on credit evaluation undertaken by responsible third parties. The institution refrains from the transcription of credit from other institutions or providers that it will not apply to its own programs.

Federal Compliance Requirements

Assignment of Credits, Program Length and Tuition (FDCR.A.10.020)

Effective September 1, 2026

An institution shall be able to equate its learning experiences with semester or quarter credit hours using practices common to institutions of higher education; to justify the lengths of its programs in comparison to similar programs found in accredited institutions of higher education; and to justify any program-specific tuition in terms of program costs, program length, and program objectives.

Assignment of Credit Hours

An institution's assignment and award of credit hours shall conform to commonly accepted practices in higher education. An institution seeking, or participating in, Title IV programs, shall demonstrate (1) that it has policies determining the credit hours awarded to courses and programs in keeping with commonly accepted practices in higher education and with any federal definition of the credit hour, as may appear in federal regulations; and (2) that it has procedures that result in an appropriate awarding of institutional credit in conformity with the policies established by the institution.

HLC may sample or use other techniques to review selected institutional programs to ensure the reliability and accuracy of the institution's assignment of credit.

Demonstrating Quality

The following sections provide examples of potential evidence that an institution could provide to demonstrate ongoing compliance with HLC requirements with respect to a competency-based educational program.

Criterion 1. Mission

- The institution's purpose for offering a CBE program aligns with and furthers the institution's mission.

  (Core Component 1.A. Mission Alignment)

Criterion 2. Integrity: Ethical and Responsible Conduct

- The institution's approach for ensuring transparency in communications to students and prospective students regarding the CBE program. Special attention should be given to the

intentional strategies that the institution will utilize to ensure that there are appropriate disclosures prior to a student's enrollment with respect to issues such as the following:

- Admissions
- Prerequisites
- Program content
- Program requirements
- Program learning outcomes
- Skills needed to be successful in the program
- Tuition and fees
- Academic policies
- Transfer pathways
- Graduate education
- Any implications for licensure in different jurisdictions (for example, with respect to hours required for licensure), as applicable

(Core Component 2.B. Transparency)

- The ways in which the institution clearly communicates any areas in which generally applicable academic policies are adapted for CBE programs. This could include, for example, policies on satisfactory academic progress, academic discipline, probation and suspension. Direct assessment programs may need additional policy considerations, including withdrawal, leave of absence and change of program.

  (Core Component 2.B. Transparency)

- The ways in which the institution clearly communicates to students the tuition model and the funding options and limitations as related to different aspects of the CBE program. For example, how the institution explains that Title IV funding is not available for prior learning and explains that it only charges tuition for aspects of the CBE program that contribute to student development in the academic term in which the student is enrolled.

  (Core Component 2.B. Transparency;
  FDCR.A.10.020 Assignment of Credits, Program Length and Tuition)

Criterion 3. Teaching and Learning for Student Success

- The institution's clearly defined learning goals and framework outlining competencies to be completed that emphasize application of learning, not simply knowledge acquisition, and alignment to disciplinary, professional and/or industry frameworks that ensure quality and learning.

  (Core Component 3.A. Educational Programs)

- The institution's approach for ensuring that students in the CBE program are achieving equivalent learning outcomes, at the same academic level of rigor, as in the institution's other similar educational programs that are not CBE programs.

  (Core Component 3.A. Educational Programs)

- If the institution has contracted with an external organization regarding the CBE program, the ways in which the institution ensures that it retains sufficient control over the development and implementation of the program.

  (Core Component 3.A. Educational Programs;
  Assumed Practice A.15 Responsibility of Conduct of Contractual Partners)

- The institution's methodology for assigning credit for the CBE program, particularly a direct assessment CBE program, in a manner reasonably equivalent to other educational programs and as otherwise aligned with commonly accepted practices in higher education.

  (Core Component 3.B. Exercise of Intellectual Inquiry; FDCR.A.10.020-Assignment of Credits, Program Length and Tuition)

- The institution's policies for ensuring that it devotes sufficient and appropriate faculty resources to the CBE program.

  (Core Component 3.C. Sufficiency of Faculty and Staff; Assumed Practice B.2.a. Reasonable Policies and Procedures for Faculty Qualifications)

- The institution's policies and procedures for ensuring appropriate academic engagement, including, as applicable, regular and substantive interaction with faculty, in the CBE program.

  (Core Component 3.C. Sufficiency of Faculty and Staff)

- The student support services that the institution offers as necessary to attend to the needs of students participating in a CBE program, including an orientation to competency-based education; advising for students regarding transfer pathways and options following completion of the CBE program; and timely interventions and plans to assist if a student is not being successful in the CBE program.

  (Core Component 3.D. Support for Student Learning and Resources for Teaching)

- The institution's policies and practices related to transcription, including attentiveness to unique issues related to CBE programs, particularly, as applicable, transcription of prior-learning assessment, and transcription practices for direct assessment CBE programs. Transcripts for CBE programs provide clear and sufficient information regarding student progress.

  (Core Component 3.D. Support for Student Learning & Resources for Teaching; Assumed Practice C.2. Transcription of Credit)

- The ways in which the institution ensures that that assessments within CBE programs are valid and reliable to demonstrate student mastery of competencies.

  (Core Component 3.E. Assessment of Student Learning)

- Assessments in the CBE program expand the student's knowledge beyond any prior learning that the student may have demonstrated at matriculation.

  (Assumed Practice B.1.f. Evaluation of Prior Learning)

- The institution continually measures student progress toward acquisition of competencies and attainment of the credential.

  (Core Component 3.E. Assessment of Student Learning)

- The institution validates the quality of the CBE program through various measures, including, for example, feedback from students, graduates and other stakeholders, such as employers; and appropriately benchmarked student success outcomes, such as licensure passage rates and graduate earnings.

  (Core Component 3.F. Program Review)

- If assessments and program reviews indicate that student success outcomes for the CBE program are not being satisfactorily obtained, the institution develops and implements plans for continued improvement.

  (Core Component 3.G. Student Success Outcomes)

Criterion 4. Sustainability: Institutional Effectiveness, Resources and Planning

- The institution's engagement efforts regarding the development and implementation of the CBE program, including faculty engagement through appropriate faculty governance structures and processes.

  (Core Component 4.A Effective Administrative Structures; Assumed Practice B.2.b Faculty Roles)

- How the institution's offering of a CBE program is incorporated into its overall strategic directions.

  (Core Component 4.C Planning for Quality Improvement)

When Competency-Based Educational Programs are Reviewed

Evaluation of an institution's first two credit-based CBE programs will occur as part of HLC's substantive change process. All direct assessment programs require review as part of HLC's substantive change process. The average timeframe for review varies by the type of review process. Evaluation of educational program activities may also be reviewed at other times if the educational program becomes a matter of concern.

Questions?

Ask the institution's HLC staff liaison.