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Competency-Based Education and Its Effect on Nursing Education: A Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

An emerging trend in nursing education is competency-based education (CBE), which offers degree advancement at a significant time and cost savings. This educational trend may promote the attainment of the bachelor's degree in nursing science because it also allows students to progress at their own pace and has been well received by nursing students. Many associate degree graduates begin their career after graduation working full time and find returning to school difficult because of time and financial constraints. The push for nursing graduates from associate degree programs to continue their education continues to increase. The attainment of the bachelor's degree in nursing science is often needed for both personal attainment and career advancement. Critics of CBE state that this model of education does not allow authentic learning and is incompatible with liberal education. In addition, CBE offers significant challenges to both educators and college administrators. The purpose of this article is to explore this educational trend on nursing education through the perspectives of the student, faculty, and administration.

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Competency can be defined as the integration of knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes (Pijl-Zieber, Barton, Konkin, Awosoga, & Caine, 2013). The definition of competency-based education (CBE) is one in which the student demonstrates the attainment of certain learning outcomes prior to progressing in their course of study. CBE is synonymous with terms such as *proficiency-based*, *mastery-based*, *outcome-based*, *performance-based*, and *standards-based education*. This educational model can take many forms in higher education ranging from a standard educational experience that is closely tied to objectives to one that is solely based on the mastery of learning outcomes. According to Mathewson (2015), CBE is poised for explosive growth in higher education in institutions across the United States. On the other hand, other sources predict that CBE will fade in the next few years because of exorbitant costs on the part of institutions because of the implementation and maintenance of technology and lack of motivation of students in choosing this model of education (University Business, 2016). The purpose of this article is to review the literature in order to explore the ramifications of this educational trend on nursing education through the perspectives of the student, faculty, and administration.

CBE is a relatively new option of learning for students in higher education but has historical roots from several decades ago in

which course objectives were based on student learning outcomes. However, CBE has recently been implemented in several colleges and universities in which the student works at their own pace without set semesters or grades and only advances upon attaining certain learning outcomes. This flexible option may attract working adults with previous life and educational experiences in which to draw upon.

The CBE model of education is not limited to only for-profit programs as many large well-known nonprofit institutions have adopted this format. Button (2014) estimated that approximately 200 CBE programs are in existence currently throughout the United States. Many well-known prestigious institutions have instituted CBE programs including the University of Michigan, the University of Wisconsin, and Perdue University among others. The adoption of CBE programs in these well-respected institutions may lend validity to this model of education.

Literature Review

A literature review was conducted to synthesize current knowledge from both peer-reviewed literature and popular educational journals to provide sufficient background on the topic of CBE. CBE has the potential to affect the stakeholders in higher education in many ways. While CBE may seem attractive to students with busy work and family obligations, what effect does this have on their

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overall educational experience? Gaps in knowledge will be emphasized that may guide further research as it pertains to nursing education.

Competency-Based Educational Model

The CBE model of education can be delivered in several varying formats. While some institutions have implemented a CBE model that is completely nontraditional, some programs have adopted portions of CBE while keeping a more traditional educational approach. In addition, a hybrid model of CBE has emerged in some higher educational institutions.

Traditional Approach

Some institutions have implemented CBE but have retained the traditional semester-based model. Educational models that have retained the traditional semester such as [Thomas Edison State University \(2016\)](#) continue to utilize the CBE model by aligning the completion of each semester with learning outcomes based on test scores, written assignments, field projects and artifacts placed in an electronic portfolio. In this model of education, the student will not be passed on to the next course unless sufficient achievement of learning outcomes is demonstrated via the electronic portfolio. In addition, the electronic portfolio is required for graduation as a demonstration that all of the required student learning outcomes of the program have been met.

According to [Thomas Edison State University \(2016\)](#), the learning outcomes assessment is a way for educators to assure that high-quality education is provided to the student. The learning outcomes assessments at Thomas Edison State University include intellectual and practical skills, civic and global leadership, and critical thinking. However, Thomas Edison State University assesses student achievement at both the course and program level. For example, the nursing program at Thomas Edison State University is based on the student achieving the baccalaureate essentials published by [the American Association of Colleges of Nursing \(2008\)](#).

Hybrid Approach

A mixed model of CBE also can be seen in some higher educational institutions. According to the [Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges \(n.d.\)](#), a hybrid model of CBE is one in which seat time continues to be based on the traditional semester, but the student cannot progress until certain competencies are completed that are not based on credit hours. According to the [University of Texas \(2016\)](#), a hybrid CBE approach includes weekly face-to-face classes along with the student working on-line toward competencies independently.

Radical Approach

On the other hand, some institutions have decided to break free from the constraints of the traditional time-based semester and have developed programs in which time is removed as a variable for the student. [Western Governor's University \(2016\)](#) and the [University of Wisconsin \(2016\)](#) have adopted this more radical approach to CBE in which students only progress in the program when learning is demonstrated without traditional grades or credit hours. In addition, CBE is touted to be an extremely affordable option for higher education. Students pay a flat tuition rate and may progress at the speed they feel most comfortable ([Western Governor's University, 2016](#)). This form of CBE is ideal for working adults because it measures learning rather than time and may take into account previous life and work experience ([Mendenhall, 2012](#)).

Organizational Theory

The adoption of CBE can best be explained by applying the Darwinian Evolutionary Organizational Change Theory purported by [van de Ven and Poole \(1995\)](#), which is borrowed from the widely known biological theory of evolution. Darwin theorized that variation in biological life resulted from selection and retention of genes through changes in the external environment ([O'Neil, 2013](#)). O'Neil went on the state that when changes occurred in the external environment, organisms with genes beneficial for survival went on to live and mate, thus reinforcing those beneficial genes. An example of natural selection can be seen when Mount Saint Helen's exploded large amounts of gray volcanic ash over a large wooded area in Washington State. Biologists noticed that, suddenly, a large population of gray moths emerged that was insignificant prior to the volcanic eruption. Scientist theorized that the eruption created an environment in which gray moths had more camouflage, which was beneficial to their mating and population growth.

Darwin's theory of natural selection can be applied to institutions of higher education that have been affected by external forces, such as the influx of adult learners who require new models of education that is tailored to their busy lives and prior knowledge. Institutions of higher education that have responded to these external forces are apt to be the most successful. As stated earlier, external forces may be economic such as high student debt, soaring tuition rates, and the influx of nontraditional students, or regulatory such as pressure on institutions of higher learning to demonstrate the learning achieved by students. CBE is one way that institutions of higher education can tailor educational programs to attend to these important external influences and grow as an institution. In the next decade, only the colleges and universities that have adapted may survive the educational climate that is present.

Student Perspective

Many working adults have begun college but failed to complete their degree leaving these former students with less earning potential and possibly reduced quality of life ([Mendenhall, 2012](#)). Students have reported that CBE is rigorous and provides a model of education that encourages learning ([Gibson, 2013b](#)). The nontraditional student has widely accepted CBE as a practical model of education that will help them achieve their goal of attaining a college degree that may be out of reach for the student previously ([Jones-Schenk, 2014; Kelchen, 2015](#)). The [United States Department of Education \(n.d.\)](#) praised the effectiveness of CBE because each educational program is tailored to the student's needs with interventions that are targeted to the special needs of the student. Increased student engagement is also one benefit of CBE according the United States Department of Education. Students in CBE program commonly work at their own pace and have exclusive access to practice tests, webinars, interactive exercises, simulations, and videos ([Western Governor's University, 2016](#)). In addition, CBE is affordable because students pay a flat rate of tuition such as at Western Governor's University, which purports a flat tuition rate of approximately \$6,000 per year ([Insensee, 2016](#)).

Student Criticisms

While many institutions advertise that CBE is an inexpensive way for the student to attain a bachelor's degree, financial aid is based on seat time per semester leaving many students unable to receive this monetary benefit ([Hainey, 2015; Kelchen, 2015; Mendenhall, 2012](#)). [Porter \(2014\)](#) recommended that the Higher Education Act, which requires credit hours to qualify for financial aid, be revised to include the achievement of competencies. However, Porter went on to state that more research on this educational model must be completed to ascertain that students are achieving their learning

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