

# Clearing the Path: Creating Innovation Space for Serving Over-Age, Under-Credited Students in Competency-Based Pathways

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## Summary

An exciting opportunity is emerging for state education agencies and districts to dramatically increase graduation rates for students who are falling off the track toward a diploma. State education agency leaders with the commitment and skill to pursue an innovative policy agenda can take advantage of three dynamic forces: (1) the creation of national overarching standards via the Common Core State Standards; (2) an ever-increasing knowledge of how to reengage over-age and under-credited students; and (3) competency-based learning models enabled by advancements in technology.

Although it will require substantial leadership to provide the required policy flexibility, the possible rewards hold great promise for our children and communities.

This article provides guidance on creating competency-based approaches for students who have fallen off the track toward graduation. Alternative school models that use aspects of competency-based approaches (e.g., Diploma Plus, Performance Learning Center, and AdvancePath Academics) are severely constrained by policies that rely on the Carnegie unit and other time-based system elements. The full benefit of competency-based alternative schools will remain unknown until enabling state policy conditions are in place.

## **Introduction**

The traditional time-based educational system in which high school students move together by cohort through the 180-day school year over a fixed four-year schedule reproduces low achievement, disengagement from school, and inequity (Sturgis and Patrick 2010).

Competency-based approaches (CBAs) offer an alternative by re-engineering the education system around learning and student success. Sturgis and Patrick provide a three-part working definition of CBAs:

- Students advance upon mastery,
- Explicit and measurable learning objectives empower students, and
- Assessment is meaningful and a positive learning experience for students.

Sturgis and Patrick argue that given the early stage of the

innovation cycle, it is best if states create space for the organic expansion of CBAs. States can nurture innovation by increasing flexibility in the policy environment, providing technical assistance, supporting peer networks and evaluating innovative models. As innovative practices develop in classrooms, schools and districts, they can further inform policy reforms and investment decisions. Drawing on a wide range of expertise, this article explores how states can create space for innovation, including design principles, minimum policy conditions and options for moving forward.

## **CBAs Respond to the Needs of Over-Age, Under-Credited (OU) Students**

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It is essential to design policies and programs based on customer needs. Some OU students may continue to go to school, while others may decide or be encouraged to leave. Many will have taken on adult responsibilities such as financially supporting or caring for their families. The majority will have academic skills two or more years below grade level, gaps in basic literacy and mathematics, and disproportionately special education issues. Given that most OU students have grown up in low-income communities, they are highly motivated to earn money but have limited experiences or relationships with

organizations in the real world beyond the secondary labor market. Finally, many of these students will have endured traumatic experiences, which can create social or emotional issues that shape their learning experiences.

CBA's intersect in powerful ways with the needs of students who are unlikely to graduate because they are over-age and under-credited. For students who have been deemed "bad" students or who have dropped out, it is truly transformative to be in an environment that is dedicated to their success.

## **Increase Likelihood of Graduation:**

Depending on state policy, many OU students are at risk of "aging out" of the K-12 system. Seat-time requirements are an insurmountable barrier for older students with elementary-level skills or few credits. CBA's allow for the necessary acceleration of skill development and credit accumulation.

## **Ensure Mastery of Skills:**

Students receive the help they need to address specific learning deficiencies while working on other competencies. Students progress, even if it takes a bit longer for some, rather than being trapped taking the same course over and over.

## **Motivate Students:**

Students are motivated by explicit, measurable learning objectives as well as just-in-time formative assessments. By taking on responsibility for their own education, students can take advantage of a full range of learning opportunities outside of the classroom.

## **Provide Educational Continuity:**

Students with complex lives, high mobility or interrupted education continue to progress without having to repeat courses. If CBAs are designed effectively, students can continue to progress on discrete learning objectives while taking care of family members, during transitions between detention and disciplinary schools, or during changes in foster care placement.

## **Design Principles for Competency-Based Pilots for OU Students**

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The following design principles are based on integrating what has been learned from CBA innovators with what has been learned from serving OU students. These principles, or design specifications, can guide discussions as policymakers, district leaders and educators shape policies and pilots.

## **Robust Competencies**

- Includes academic and efficacy standards
- Aligns with standards benchmarked for success after high school, such as Common Core State Standards, college entrance requirements, or global standards
- Structures learning objectives so that they are explicit and measurable
- Offers explicit requirements for granting of diploma or other certification

## **Student-Centered**

- Approaches students holistically
- Provides personalized learning maps that include academic and efficacy competencies
- Organizes services and supports varied in intensity based on student learning needs
- Structures simultaneously recuperative and accelerated learning
- Focuses on student preferences in considering high school certification, college, and career choices

## **Designed Around Learning**

- Advances students to more challenging coursework upon mastery, not age
- Offers students work at levels that are appropriately challenging
- Provides multiple methods of instruction (context, content, and instructional methodology) to ensure that students from different cultures and life

experiences have the opportunity to succeed

- Uses valid and reliable assessments in ways that are meaningful to students
- Assesses students on their performance in multiple ways and multiple times to ensure that proficiency has been reached
- Integrates student information and learning management systems designed around competency-based approaches, providing data to support students, teachers, and schools for improving performance
- Employs standards-based grading that focuses on a demonstration of learning rather than on attendance, participation, or behaviors

## **Expanded Learning Opportunities**

- Maximizes learning that can occur anytime, anyplace, with minimal restrictions based on attendance, school day or calendar  
Offers online and/or computer-based instructional software that is competency-based  
Constructs expanded learning opportunities around specific learning objectives

## **Flexibility in Staffing**

- Broadens school staffing around student needs including youth development specialists, learning coaches and multiple methods of instruction, such as

traditional school-based teachers, online courses, computer-based instruction and dual enrollment at community college

- Revises human resources policies to include a team approach to educating students, revised expectations for teaching staff to have greater expertise in instruction and assessment, and greater flexibility in hiring teachers
- Provides adequate support for educators including integrated student information and learning management systems, coaching in instruction and assessment, and opportunities for educators to build a common understanding of proficiency

## **Engaged Community and Stakeholders**

- Engages students, parents, and teachers in early stages of decisions to move forward on CBA strategy
- Facilitates community-wide discussions, including employers and colleges, on the competencies needed for graduation and success after high school
- Seeks engagement with OU students on outreach strategies and co-design efficacy competencies
- Engages students and teachers on how the competencies would be assessed; in other words, what does proficient work look like?

## **State Policy Conditions for CBAs for OU Students**

# State Policy Conditions for CBAs for OU Students

State policymakers need to address two related challenges: policy conditions and development of operational innovations. Given that there are dispersed pockets of innovation, knowledge of best practices has yet to be adequately documented. Foundations are investing in research that will help to fill this gap. In addition, leading states are already beginning to revise their policies as they are informed by the experiences of districts and schools. The Council of Chief State School Officers' Next Generation Learning Innovation Lab Network will disseminate information on effective state policies.

For state education agencies to realize the full benefit of CBAs in schools, a set of policy conditions must be in place. Districts and schools developing CBAs require the flexibility to reorganize functions and staffing, expand high-quality content and instructional systems, and incorporate new tools, technologies and supports. Given this complexity, policy reforms will require a multi-pronged process. Partial implementation will always seem the path of least resistance. While the easier elements such as standards-based grading and seat-time waivers are valuable, they are inadequate in enabling the full impact of CBAs.

Working together, policymakers and practitioners can

create a policy environment to replace the current time-based system with a learning-based system. Collaborative efforts, requiring leadership and creativity, are essential in revising bureaucratic regulatory codes, untangling the unintended consequences of a time-based system and, when necessary, addressing legislative barriers. The policy conditions described below are a starting point for creating competency-based innovations.

## **Release from Time-Based Regulations**

- Students are granted credits based on demonstrated proficiency, not seat-time. States establish policy conditions for districts and schools to award credits based on mastery.
- Students can pursue learning objectives in the classroom, during out-of-school time, in the evening with online courses, and throughout the summer. States remove barriers related to time-based policies, including mandatory in-school hours for students and the traditional school calendar.
- Students will progress upon mastery with open enrollment and open exit. States eliminate barriers that limit student progression.
- Students can take additional time to master competencies, including temporary leave of absence when family or community responsibilities increase. States adjust accountability systems so that schools are rewarded for keeping students engaged.

# Anytime, Anyplace Learning Opportunities

- Students can enroll in competency-based online courses as needed, even those offered by other districts and states. States remove policy barriers that limit access to courses needed for graduation.
- Students are recognized for proficiency in learning objectives developed outside of the traditional school day and year (including jobs, participation in clubs and community service). State policy broadens the definition of teacher to educator so that more adults can engage in supporting student learning.
- Students can transfer competencies across schools, including jail and disciplinary schools. States recognize learning maps as valid “transcripts” for portability of competencies.

## Funding and Accountability

- Students are able to re-enroll in school with minimal delay. States align financial incentives to support rapid re-enrollment of students.
- Student progress in learning is based on academic and efficacy competencies that include discrete learning objectives. States work with schools and districts to create data warehouses for individual learning maps.
- Schools are able to innovate with clear focus on student learning with performance metrics that

include learning outcomes, affordability and rates of acceleration. States protect the integrity of the innovation process from reporting requirements that may cause harmful effects.

## **The State Role in Creating Innovation Space**

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The first strategic decision that needs to be made by state education agency leaders is the degree to which innovation space will be established for schools and districts. Grants for pilots are often too limited in time and scope to fulfill the research and development functions. Thus, chief state school officers should consider the following questions:

How can the innovation space be designed to

- generate adequate innovation capital (Andrew Hargadon, the founder of the Center for Entrepreneurship at the University of California Davis, describes the need for multiple forms of capital to support innovation)? Such capital includes financial resources, time for effective development, opportunities for experimentation and refinement of new practices, access to social capital such as networks of innovators, and intellectual support to address specific challenges.

- supply adequate time and support for the stages of development, including concept development and testing, beta testing, and technical implementation such as process improvements and continuous improvement feedback loops, and replication (i.e., commercialization or scaling)?
- provide for appropriate use of evaluation to inform innovation?

Philanthropic or corporate partnerships can be helpful in providing the funds for a full-fledged research and development capacity as well as creating political cover necessary for sustainability.

State education leaders will need to devise the scope of innovation based on the mix of policies in place and the ease in revising them. In the following discussion, three options are considered.

## **Research and Development Program**

States can create protected space for innovation by developing a five- to seven-year program in which the grantees have full flexibility to test out new ideas, design the specific tools and practices needed to support CBAs, and fully bring the innovative school model “to market.” For example, the Florida Virtual School performance-based model was created by being given a “blank page” within a well-protected innovation space. It is important that adequate funding is provided for evaluation or

continuous improvement so that practices can be quickly tested and refined. This option is likely to require a philanthropic partner. In addition, it will be easier to test our new ideas with start-ups or new schools.

## **Competency-Based Pathway Pilot**

A five-year pilot program can be designed to fully develop the architecture to support CBAs, including:

- Reliable and valid assessment system
- Robust competencies and learning objectives aligned with college and career-ready standards
- Personalized student learning maps that go beyond traditional check-off lists to reflect learning progressions
- Professional development that supports educator collaboration in tuning protocols and rubrics to support high-quality standards
- Integrated student information and learning management systems customized to the needs of OU students
- Community outreach and communications on implications of CBAs and community input on competencies
- Partnerships that provide supports and opportunities for students

Grantees should commit to some degree of transparency so that other schools and districts can directly benefit

from innovations developed with state funds.

## **Expedited Waiver Process**

States can enable more innovation by establishing credit flexibility (seat-time waivers) for schools developing CBAs. Although a waiver to grant credits based on demonstrated proficiency rather than seat-time is the initial condition required for CBAs, schools will find that they will want to remove other bureaucratic and regulatory barriers as well. States will need to work closely with innovators to expedite waivers or regulatory changes when time-based policies create misalignment and barriers.

As Sturgis and Patrick (2010) highlighted, there is a risk that poorly implemented CBAs can result in lowered standards. Thus, states will need to establish a mechanism to ensure that schools requesting waivers have a quality control system in place that maintains academic rigor.

## **Concluding Remarks**

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The investment in competency-based innovations will provide invaluable knowledge and products to inform efforts to move beyond the time-based system, improve services for students at risk of not graduating, and create

greater customization across the full spectrum of students. By states creating local “laboratories,” the essential elements of the CBA architecture will be tested and fine-tuned. Working together, innovators and state leaders can construct appropriate state policies to guide high-quality CBAs in schools.

Most importantly for our young people and our future, alternative schools that develop dynamic CBAs will serve as lighthouses, illuminating the path for all districts so that each and every student can proudly claim a diploma that certifies that they are prepared for college and career.

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## Reference

## Reference

Sturgis, C. and S. Patrick. (2010, November). *When Success Is the Only Option: Designing Competency-Based Pathways for Next Generation Learning*. Nellie Mae Education Foundation. Available at [http://www.inacol.org/research/docs/iNACOL\\_Success\\_OnlyOptn.pdf](http://www.inacol.org/research/docs/iNACOL_Success_OnlyOptn.pdf).