

COMPETENCY-BASED BUSINESS DEGREE

ISSUE BRIEF

Coming 2015: Competency-based business transfer degree

In January 2015, thirteen Washington community colleges will launch an online, competency-based business transfer degree – the first in our state’s community and technical college system. Below are answers to commonly asked questions.

Which colleges will offer this degree?

Thirteen colleges plan to offer the online, competency-based business degree beginning in January 2015: Bellevue, Centralia, Clark, Columbia Basin, Everett, Green River, North Seattle, Olympic, Pierce District, Shoreline, South Seattle, Spokane Falls, and Walla Walla. Tacoma Community Colleges will also offer the competency degree if granted approval from its board of trustees.

Is this a new degree?

No, our colleges already offer this business degree, and online education has been around for a long time. The difference is the competency-based approach.

What’s the benefit of competency-based education?

Competency-based degrees offer a shorter path to a degree because students advance as soon as they master the subject matter. Students work at their own pace and move as far and fast as their proven knowledge takes them. Students in this particular competency-based program will be taught by full-time, highly qualified instructors and will receive guidance from navigators.

For working adults who already have knowledge under their belts, the program can offer a fast track to a degree and the flexibility of studying from home.

The degree will transfer to four-year universities so students can get a jump-start on a bachelor’s in business administration.

Community and technical colleges in Washington offer competency-based online workforce certificates – in Information Technology – but this will be the first competency-based online degree.

What will it cost? Will it qualify for financial aid?

This degree compresses the standard two-year business transfer degree into an 18-month degree. It assumes students will advance faster without required seat-time and traditional college breaks.

Students will enroll in six-month terms and pay \$2,666 per term in state tuition and fees – the equivalent of taking two quarters of 15 credits each. (Quarters are three months.) This does not include any local college fees that might be added on. The program will qualify for state and federal financial aid.

Does the governor-appointed State Board need to approve this degree?

State Board approval is unnecessary because the degree itself is not new, only the competency-based delivery model. However, a needed change in tuition rules requires State Board approval. Tuition is now charged based on the number of credits a student takes rather than the length of a term. In June, the State Board will hold a public hearing on a proposed change to allow term-based tuition.

Will the program be academically rigorous?

Absolutely. Courses will be taught by full-time, qualified instructors, and navigators will help guide students in the competency-based approach. Unlike traditional courses – where students receive college credit for earning a D or above – students in this degree program must master subjects at the equivalent of an A or B grade to get college credit.

How will colleges know students are actually the test-takers?

Students will be monitored using video, web conferencing, layered assessments or proctored exams (off-campus, supervised exams).

Will four-year universities accept this degree?

Yes. The business transfer degree has been offered for a long time now. The courses will be the same, and credits will be transcribed as they are now (for example, 5 credits of English Composition I and 5 credits of Financial Accounting). Transcripts for students in the competency-based program will show either an A or a B in each subject because students must reach that competency threshold to pass a course and receive college credit.

Is this identical to the WGU model?

As the flagship institution for competency-based education in Washington, Western Governors University (WGU) advised community colleges. One key difference in approach: WGU hires separate instructors to design curriculum, teach students, and assess outcomes. At community colleges, the same faculty members will both teach the competency-based courses and assess the students. College faculty recommended this approach.

If students work alone, won't they get lost?

Some students do better in a classroom setting and others in an online setting. Colleges will help students understand what the competency-based program will be like and help them make the best choice. Students will work with qualified instructors and a program navigator, and interact regularly through email, phone web conferencing, video capture and other tools.

Will the courses be taught by adjunct professors?

Teaching faculty will be full-time or prorated full-time. As the program's fiscal agent, Columbia Basin College in Pasco will hire instructors under existing collective bargaining agreements.

Will students receive the degree from their own college?

Yes, students will receive a diploma and transcript from the college in which they enroll. Likewise, state funding for the students (the state FTE) will stay with the college.