

What is the Issue and Why Does it Matter?

Competency-based education (CBE) definition: offers a flexible way for students to earn credit based on demonstration of subject-matter knowledge learned either through self-paced instruction or examinations based on mastery of competencies.¹

The increasing need for highly-skilled employees in the workplace has policymakers and higher education leaders focused on innovative ways for students to access postsecondary education. These access points can include online programs, prior learning assessments and, the subject of this snapshot, competency-based education.

The National Center on Education Statistics future projections show the adult population in postsecondary education growing at a higher percentage than students under the age of 25.² With an influx of adult students, states are beginning to experiment with alternative modes of learning and accumulating credit, including competency-based education.

Although competency-based education is not limited to the adult student population, these students typically encompass the majority of the population in these programs. Adult students have specific needs for postsecondary success including increased course flexibility through additional course section offerings in their major and multiple options for financial aid and affordability.^{3,4} Competency-based education programs often provide a lower cost, allow students to work at their own pace and may or may not incur assessment fees. The adult workforce population looking to up-skill may also benefit from competency-based education programs.

Competency-based education policies may not be as far-reaching or prevalent statewide as prior learning assessments, as these policies may create a non-traditional education delivery model. Many of the introduced and enacted policies include studies on how to integrate competency-based education into current institutions or provide a specific program/institution for this delivery model.

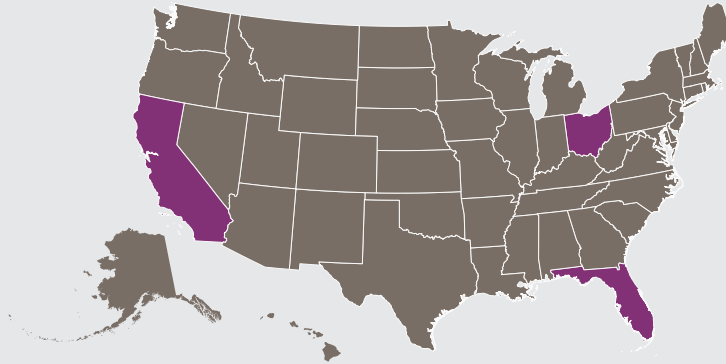
The main goal of competency-based education serves to award credit/degrees to students for meeting specific skill competencies agreed upon by faculty, industry leaders and workforce representatives. This innovative delivery model could create greater access to postsecondary education for returning adults, low-income students and working adults needing additional skills.

The following sections of this Policy Snapshot provide a summary of 2016 and 2017 legislative activities, as well as legislation, board policies and programs from previous years.

How Many States Considered Legislation in 2016?


- Three states considered competency-based education legislation.
- One bill was enacted.


Which States Considered Legislation in 2016?




State	Legislation	Status
California	A.B. 2419	Failed
Ohio	H.B. 474	Died in Committee
Florida	H.B. 1157 S.B. 1638	Enacted Died

Examples of 2016 State Legislation

 **California:** [Assembly Bill 2419](#) would have established the New University of California as the fourth segment of postsecondary education in the state. The bill specified that the New University of California would not offer instruction, but issue credentials based on student examinations. The goal of the fourth segment of postsecondary education was for students to obtain the requisite knowledge and skills to pass examinations administered by the university from any source the student deems appropriate.

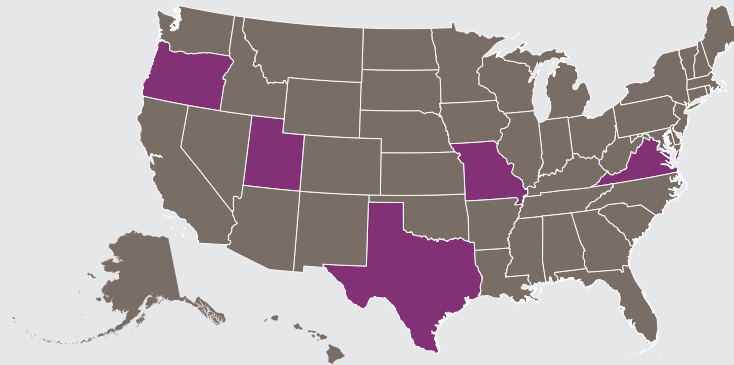
 **Ohio:** [House Bill 474](#) (section 3333.45) would have allowed the chancellor of higher education to enter a partnership with an eligible institution to provide competency-based education programs. The terms of the agreement include: approval process for programs; eligibility of students enrolled for state student financial aid programs; articulation and transfer policies that apply to the institution; reporting requirements; and any other requirements that the chancellor determines to be in the best interest of the state. Any institution entering into a partnership will be designated as a state institution of higher education for the purpose of providing competency-based education programs. The institution will not receive any state share of instruction funds.

 **Florida:** [House Bill 1157](#) ([companion S.B. 1638](#)) directed the Florida Department of Education to award postsecondary course credit for additional examinations including Excelsior College subject examination, Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Education Support (DANTES) subject standardized test and Defense Language Proficiency Test (DLPT).

How Many States Have Considered Legislation in 2017?

- At least five states considered competency-based education legislation.
- Seven bills were introduced.
- Two bills were enacted, five bills are pending.

Which States Have Considered Legislation in 2017?



State	Legislation	Status
Missouri	H.B. 411	Died
Oregon	H.B. 3290	Pending
	H.B. 3289	Pending
Texas	H.B. 2290 (S.B. 1103 companion)	Pending
	S.B. 1103 (H.B. 2290 companion)	Pending
Utah	S.B. 190	Enacted
Virginia	H.B. 46	Enacted

Examples of 2017 State Legislation


Oregon: [House Bill 3289](#) requires the Higher Education Coordinating Commission to submit an annual report to interim committees of the Legislative Assembly that describes progress made in providing competency-based education in public postsecondary institutions. The report must describe the effectiveness of expanding competency-based education, identify issues and barriers, analyze competency-based education models to determine which have been successful and recommend specific policy changes and initiatives institutions can implement to expand competency-based education.


Virginia: [House Bill 411](#) directs the secretary of education to establish a School Readiness Committee to address the development of an effective early childhood education workforce professional development and credentialing system. As per their requirements, the committee develop a competency-based professional development pathway for educators working with children from birth to age five in both public and private programs.


Utah: [Senate Bill 190](#) includes competency-based learning strategies as an element of the Computing Partnerships Grants program. The program will incentivize public schools and school districts to work with the STEM Action Center, staff of the Utah State Board of Education, Talent Ready Utah, industry representatives and secondary partners on the design and implementation of comprehensive K-16 computing partnerships.


Previous Legislative and Policy Activity

Several states introduced legislative actions related to competency-based education prior to 2016 and 2017. The following examples do not necessarily represent the full scope of legislation or postsecondary coordinating and governing board policies, but demonstrate states' interests in pursuing policies that encompass various aspects of competency-based education. This section also provides an overview of Western Governors University, which provides online, competency-based degree programs.

 **Illinois:** In 2015, both houses adopted [House Joint Resolution 52](#), requiring the Illinois Board of Higher Education establish a Higher Education Commission on the Future of the Workforce. The commission is required to conduct a study in which one area to explore includes developing distance and online learning, as well as competency-based credits to serve place-bound and adult learners, including military personnel and veterans. The commission presented their [report](#) on August 15, 2016.

 **Maryland:** [COMAR 13B.02.02.16](#) was adopted in 2014, providing guidance in offering credit for competency-based education. An institution can award credit for competency-based education based on successful completion of an acceptable standardized examination, an examination developed by the institution, a portfolio assessment or another assessment method approved by the secretary of education to demonstrate competencies. Each institution must submit a written policy articulating standards for the assessment and awarding of credits to the secretary.

 **Oklahoma:** In 2015, Oklahoma introduced [Senate Bill 504](#) to add institutions offering online, competency-based degree programs to the list of eligible institutions that students in the Oklahoma Higher Learning Access Program may attend. The program is now called Oklahoma's Promise, and allows students whose families earn \$50,000 or less annually to earn a college tuition scholarship.

 **Texas:** Introduced in 2015, [House Bill 3027](#) ultimately was left pending in the Senate. The bill would have created the Texas Competency-Based Education Grant Program for students enrolled in competency-based online or other distance education baccalaureate degree programs at certain private institutions. Eligible institutions would have included general academic teaching institutions, private or independent institutions, public junior colleges and nonprofit, tax-exempt, regionally accredited colleges or universities offering competency-based, exclusively online baccalaureate degree programs.

Western Governors University (WGU): [WGU](#) is a competency-based, online university catering specifically to the adult student population looking to earn a bachelor's or master's degree. The university was created in 1995 by 19 U.S. governors wanting to break the mold of traditional higher education. WGU is accredited by the [Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities](#) (NWCCU), a regional accreditation body. There are six state-affiliated universities, although WGU enrolls students from all 50 states, including [Indiana](#), [Missouri](#), [Nevada](#), [Tennessee](#), [Texas](#) and [Washington](#). Students earn degrees through demonstration of competencies in required areas through assessments. The degree programs allow students to move at their desired pace as well as accelerate their program through prior experience.

Resources

- Rebecca Klein-Collins, [Competency-Based Degree Programs in the U.S.: Postsecondary Credentials for Measurable Student Learning and Performance](#) (Chicago: Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, 2012).
- Carolin Hagelskamp, David Schleifer and Christopher DiStasi, [Is College Worth it for Me? How Adults Without Degrees Think About Going \(Back\) to School](#) (San Francisco: Public Agenda, 2013).
- Stephen R. Porter and Kevin Reilly, [Competency-Based Education as a Potential Strategy to Increase Learning and Lower Costs](#) (Washington: HCM Strategists, 2014).
- Rebecca Klein-Collins, [Sharpening Our Focus on Learning: The Rise of Competency-Based Approaches to Degree Completion](#), (Champaign: National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment, 2013).

Endnotes

1. “Adapted from the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning,” CAEL, <http://www.cael.org/higher-education/competency-based-education> (accessed May 16, 2017).
2. “Number and percentage of public school students participating in programs for English language learners, by state: Selected years, 2002-03 through 2011-12,” National Center for Education Statistics, http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d13/tables/dt13_204.20.asp (accessed May 16, 2017).
3. Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2015-16 Adult Learners Report (Cedar Rapids: Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2016), http://cdn2.hubspot.net/hubfs/617695/2015-16_RNL_AdultLearners_Report_Final.pdf?submissionGuid=4f688ed0-d5f6-42d5-845d-9d343aba27c4.
4. Carolin Hagelskamp, David Schleifer and Christopher DiStasi, Is College Worth It For Me? How adults without degrees think about going (back) to school (San Francisco: Public Agenda, 2013), https://www.publicagenda.org/files/IsCollegeWorthItForMe_PublicAgenda_2013.pdf.

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About Postsecondary Legislative Tracking

The Postsecondary and Workforce Development Institute at Education Commission of the States tracks legislation on multiple issues related to college readiness and higher education. The team follows the bill's status from introduction through its final action, summarizes key provisions and assigns topics. The policy tracking helps keep an eye on trends, innovative policy approaches and the overall landscape of higher education legislative activity. This information is leveraged for several purposes, including policy snapshots that offer a brief background on a topic, a visual take on recent bills and summaries of selected state legislation.

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