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Acknowledgments

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Introduction

In comparison with other industries and sectors, higher education has historically been a slow adopter of innovation. That appears to be changing. Certainly the growing acceptance and popularity of online learning is one example, but innovation in higher education is now going much further than merely altering the mode of instructional delivery. Today's innovations are shaking up the underlying structures of higher education. This is particularly the case in innovations that shift the focus from a student's seat time to the student's assessed learning outcomes. These innovations can result in significant changes for the institution: courses are broken down into modules to address specific student learning needs, credit hours are bypassed in favor of demonstrated competencies, and assessment is disaggregated from instruction.

This publication focuses on two assessment-focused innovations: prior learning assessment (PLA) and competency-based education (CBE). PLA is a term used for various methods for assessing and awarding credit for the college-level learning a student may have acquired through work, military, and life experiences, or through self-study. CBE is a term used for programs that establish clear expectations for what graduates must know and be able to do, and then assess for these required student competencies. Many CBE models have been designed to allow students to learn and earn a degree at their own pace; many are also striving to reduce the cost of a degree by taking advantage of technology for instructional delivery, assessment, student support services, and monitoring of student progress. With PLA and many CBE programs, students build on what they already know to obtain a postsecondary credential.

Although models for CBE and PLA have existed for at least 40 years—and thus are not "new" innovations—greater numbers of institutions are showing interest in them, if not already offering them as options for students. This growing interest in CBE and PLA is partly due to pressures on institutions to increase degree completion and reduce costs.

Furthermore, technology is allowing for different approaches such as adaptive technologies, learning analytics, self-paced online courses, and web-supported coaching and other student services. These advances can lower costs while supporting greater scalability of the programs.

Institutional leaders who are beginning to focus on CBE or PLA commonly wrestle with issues related to changing the roles of faculty, developing robust assessments of student learning, and determining which specific implementation models best align with the institution's overall mission. However, they must also explore changes to degree requirements, determine how to track students' academic progress, and define whether and how the new approaches will translate to the credit-hour based transcript and record systems. For these and other reasons, it is critical for the design and implementation teams to involve the registrar early in the design process as well as during implementation.

As Diamond and DeBlois (2007) have noted, the registrar's role includes many responsibilities, including "translator, arbiter, influencer, recorder, encoder, manipulator, and implementer of academic policy," not to mention "keeper of official transcript records, privacy policies, enterprise information system architecture, real and virtual classroom usage rules, and academic calendar parameters."

Following a discussion of how the various challenges facing higher education have bolstered interest in innovation, this publication provides registrars and other student support staff with an introduction to prior learning assessment and competency-based education. It further explores what registrars might consider in their roles supporting institutional adoption of these assessment-focused programs and services.