Students in USU's Competency Based Education Pilot Program Seeing Success

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In an effort to provide more opportunities for students, Utah State University is seeing success with a pilot program in Competency Based Education (CBE) in partnership with Northrup Grumman. A group of 20 non-traditional adult learners employed by the internationally recognized space, aeronautics, defense and cyberspace company Northrup Grumman, have been going through the program at USU Brigham City since fall 2019.

In the past several years, CBE programs have been gaining popularity with students across the country. Rather than a class being defined by the number of credit hours or the amount of time spent in the class, CBE courses are made up of a number of “competencies.” Students receive feedback on each task related to the competency they turn in and are given the chance to revise and resubmit until they have demonstrated that they have achieved the required proficiency in that competency. If a student is already familiar with the competency through work or other study, they are able to demonstrate those competencies in fewer revisions, consequently shortening the time spent on it.

“It makes sense that students would be interested in classes that are designed to help them use their previous experience and current skills to move quickly through a degree program,” said Rene Eborn Special Assistant to the Vice President for Strategic Initiatives with Academic and Instructional Services.

The USU pilot CBE program consists of courses in general education, the hardest kinds of classes to do in a CBE format. USU is working hard to make sure the classes are relevant to a wide variety of students, broadening the potential benefits of the program as it looks to expand past the pilot stage. However, there are many obstacles to ensure the continued success and growth of CBE options at USU.

“There are many challenges, including how to help faculty define their course competencies and how to get Canvas to work with the new class structure,” Eborn said.

Most CBE programs admit students for six months at a base tuition cost and allow the students to work through as many competencies as they can in that time. This model allows knowledgeable students to complete the equivalent of many more credits than a student in a traditional length semester would in the same amount of time. While this is one of the biggest benefits of CBE programs, it is one the greatest challenges for a traditional university to implement.

Several offices at the university have joined together to address those challenges to the benefit of the students. The offices of Academic and Instructional Services, USU Online and leadership at USU Brigham City are working on all angles of the CBE pilot program to best integrate the various components that need to come together for success.

One student in the pilot CBE program praises the university and wants it to continue and grow that it can help others interested in this type of program in the future.

Currently, USU offers CBE classes in all of the general education areas. For more information, visit https://www.usu.edu/online/partnerships/. Companies interested in collaborating with the university to provide additional CBE opportunities for their employees may contact Rene Eborn (rene.eborn@usu.edu).

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