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Review of A Leader's Guide to Competency-Based Education

Tyechia Paul
Fayetteville State University, tpaul5@uncfsu.edu

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Book Review

Dodge, L., Long, C. S., & Bushway, D. J. (2018). *A Leader's Guide to Competency-based Education: From Inception to Implementation*. Stylus. 157 pp. $32.50 (paperback)

Reviewed by: Tyechia Veronica Paul, *Fayetteville State University, USA*
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A Leader's Guide to Competency-Based Education: From Inception to Implementation is an actionable and informative resource for establishing competency-based education (CBE) programs at institutions of higher education (IHE). It provides practitioner-focused, CBE program design methods, valuable exercises, and replicable resources.

The book starts with an enlightening historical narrative of CBE. It examines CBE program development efforts and counterefforts on the national level. Chapter 1 presents considerations for IHEs that are planning to implement CBE programs. Chapter 2 discusses specific program design approaches, including the deconstruction–reconstruction approach and the framework origin approach. Both involve collaboratively developing an overarching competency statement, coding the outcomes to track their origin in terms of course or framework, aligning outcomes for clarity, measurability, and fit within the academic level, and logically categorizing outcomes. Chapter 3 describes types of assessment and provides examples of assessment principles from multiple institutions. Surprisingly, the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) standards for assessing learning were not included among the examples (Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, 2022). CAEL focuses on adult learners, who are often the target population for which CBE programs are developed (Marienau & Younger, 2017). The chapter also discusses ways to ensure the reliability and validity of CBE assessment methods. Chapter 4 presents ways to create CBE-friendly, holistic educational ecosystems. The CBE program staffing models and considerations in Chapter 5 would have been well placed earlier in the book. Chapter 6 addresses many of the questions that stakeholders unfamiliar with CBE will have, including how CBE credit should be detailed on the academic transcript and how elements of CBE should be reflected in the learning management system (LMS), the student information system, and the financial aid system. Chapter 7 identifies the entities that must approve CBE programs. The book concludes with Chapter 8 suggesting a three-step process for program implementation.

The book's strengths were that it provided detailed guides for the varied approaches to CBE, shared assessment design principles, and introduced some important

considerations for those interested in establishing CBE programs. Most of the book's planning exercises will be useful for early CBE-related discussions and work sessions. The authors' enthusiasm about the topic is apparent. They clearly define CBE and espouse the benefits of CBE programs. Yet, they are also transparent about the challenges associated with program design and implementation.

There are some recommended amendments for future editions of this book. Some sections of the book contradict one another. For example, Chapter 1 suggests a top-down approach to program implementation, coming from "the board, president, and all senior leaders" (p. 20). That is inconsistent with change management best practice, which promotes the early engagement of stakeholders to elicit the input of, and obtain buy-in and commitment from, those who would be impacted by the decision and those responsible for carrying out the directives. Additionally, the suggested top-down approach conflicts with the principles of shared governance to which most universities strive to adhere. The book then contradicted itself in the next chapter and discouraged the top-down approach by stating that CBE initiatives cannot be "force-fed" (p. 36).

The book could better reflect IHEs as businesses and demonstrate understanding of the associated concepts. For example, the book mentions return on investment (ROI) for CBE programs in qualitative terms as improved reputation, morale, and ability to serve learners (p. 20). Yet, ROI is primarily a quantified value, such as revenue, profit, and time or cost savings. In the case of CBE programs, ROI can be calculated as the monetary value of increased retention, decreased attrition, and increased persistence through additional degree programs, and can include revenue generated by prior learning assessment (PLA) portfolio review fees. Despite being, by definition, a component of CBE, discussion of PLA is largely excluded from this book, which states that PLA should be separate from matriculation in a CBE program (p. 118). Additionally, the book does not present a formula or model for quantifying ROI. When considering expanding their CBE offerings and seeking stakeholder buy-in, some IHEs find it useful to quantify ROI (Paul, 2020) by measuring the cost of attrition (Raisman, 2013) and the financial benefit of CBE in terms of both increased retention and persistence, and other quantified metrics. Before attempting to implement a CBE program, IHEs need more information than provided in this book. They need to understand how to measure CBE-related costs, ascertain implementation timeframe, and quantify ROI in a meaningful manner.

This book is a good introduction to CBE. One of the highlights is the detailed historical context it provides. Overall, this book is worth recommending based on the valuable information and thoughtful insights that it provides readers who seek a foundational understanding of CBE.

References

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