

# Customized, Outcome-based, Relevant Evaluation (CORE) at Lipscomb University

## A competency-based education case study

*This is the first of what will be a series of case studies of competency-based degree programs that have been emerging in recent years. The case studies are prepared by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) with funding from Lumina Foundation.*

## The Lipscomb CORE Program: An Overview

- Lipscomb University, a private, faith-based, liberal arts institution in Nashville, Tennessee, has developed a competency-based education (CBE) model for non-traditional students returning to college to complete a degree. The Customized, Outcome-based, Relevant Evaluation (CORE) is a CBE model that integrates the use of behavioral assessment, online development, faculty coaching, and traditional coursework that can lead to a bachelor's degree.
- A total of 15 competencies are evaluated by Lipscomb using behavioral assessment at the CORE Competency Assessment and Development Center. These competencies can be transcribed through a system of electronic badges that document four levels of mastery for each competency. The badges can be used to demonstrate competencies to an employer, or they may be converted to credit hours and applied towards a bachelor's degree at Lipscomb. Up to 30 credit hours can be earned through the behavioral assessment of competencies. In the behavioral assessment process, the student is placed in a simulated work situation, and behavior is observed and evaluated by multiple assessors.
- Students who do not demonstrate all competencies can enroll in online, self-paced modules to develop the competencies. Faculty coaches assist the students during these courses.
- Many CORE students come to the program through their employers, who are interested in the behavioral assessment of work-related competencies.
- In developing this approach, Lipscomb has addressed a number of challenges, ranging from adaptation of a business model to higher education, addressing faculty perceptions of CBE, internal institutional policy, and higher education accreditation regulations.

### CORE Snapshot

- Assessment center operations began June 2013. SACSCOC accredited for academic credit December 2013.
- The program completes the final 66 credits of a 126 credit hour bachelor's degree in professional studies in organizational leadership or a bachelor of arts or science in integrated studies
- 15 competency framework; badges awarded for individual competencies
- 8 hour behavioral assessment, with potential to demonstrate competencies that equal up to 30 credit hours towards a degree
- Potential cost savings of 36% compared to enrollment in non-competency program

## What Is Competency-Based Education?

In recent years, there has been a surge of interest in competency-based degree programs at the postsecondary level. These programs are promising for the future of higher education because they establish clear expectations for what graduates must know and be able to do, and many models have been designed to allow students to learn and earn a degree at their own pace. The emphasis on learning acquired rather than seat time is particularly important for adult and non-traditional learners who bring learning from their work and life experiences to higher education. Competency-based models allow students to build on what they already know to obtain a post-secondary credential.

## Background

In response to the shifting educational needs of the nation in general and Tennessee in particular, Lipscomb University began its first specialized adult program in 1990 in order to offer working adults without degrees flexibility in their educational options. Over the course of the next 15 years, the Adult Degree Program met with varying levels of success, but it has been growing steadily since the mid-2000s when economic factors and the new GI Bill encouraged many adults to return to seek their degrees.

Lipscomb's stated commitment to non-traditional students, along with increased national and statewide focus on providing easier and more affordable access to higher education, led to the 2011 formation of the College of Professional Studies, meant to provide "innovative, market-driven and customizable programs primarily for adult students" (Long & Clark, 2013, pp. 120-121). It was through this newly founded college that Lipscomb's brand of CBE was first formed, with the purpose of recognizing that certain students bring a "pre-existing set of college-level competencies, knowledge, skills, and abilities acquired through out-of-class learning experiences" (CORE

for individual students, 2014). The new CBE program is called the Customized, Outcome-based, Relevant Evaluation (CORE), which is a CBE model that integrates the use of behavioral assessment, online competency development modules, faculty coaching, and traditional coursework that leads to a bachelor's degree. Students in the CORE program can potentially earn up to 30 credit hours through competency-based assessment, which can save them up to \$11,770 (36%) off the total price of tuition.

### The CORE student

Tennessee has around one million people who have attended some college but have not earned a degree. Lipscomb hopes to provide an educational alternative that allows such individuals the ability to complete their degrees. The ideal CORE candidate:

- is a non-traditional student or adult learner;
- has an associate degree or equivalent; and
- has at least two years of work experience in the field they want to choose for their concentration.

## Identifying the Competencies

Lipscomb administrators explored different strategies for defining and assessing competencies. They ultimately selected an extant research-based business sector competency framework called Polaris®, created by Dr. Bruce Griffiths of Organization Systems International (OSI). The Polaris® model employs behavioral

assessment, a process in which the student is placed in a simulated situation and behavior is observed and evaluated by multiple assessors, to determine the competencies demonstrated by students and employees.

According to Charla Long, Dean of the College of Professional Studies, the appeal of the Polaris®



Students working on team assignments in the CORE assessment center

photo by Kristi Jones

model for Lipscomb was the extensive research that Dr. Griffiths had done to analyze different types of jobs using the Polaris® competency framework. From this work, Dr. Griffiths identified the most commonly needed competencies across various job categories. The resulting Polaris® framework defines a total of 41 competencies, organized in 7 categories: interpersonal, communication, management, leadership, conceptual, personal, and contextual. This research convinced Lipscomb staff of the validity and reliability of the competency model and of the related behavioral assessments developed by Dr. Griffiths.

Since no undergraduate program had yet utilized the Polaris® model, Lipscomb enlisted the help of local business and industry to identify which competencies are most relevant to the regional job market and the needs of local employers. Planning with these stakeholders and enlisted faculty took place over the course of six months. Ultimately, 17 competencies were chosen for use in Lipscomb's new CBE program, 15 of which are "soft skills" that are assessed in the CORE Center (see the following page for the list of 15 competencies).

Each competency has a detailed definition and associated behavioral indicators that the student

must demonstrate. For example, the definition for "Problem Solving and Decision Making" is:

*Effective performers are able to identify problems, solve them, act decisively and show good judgment. They isolate causes from symptoms and compile alternatives to illuminate problems. They involve others as appropriate and gather information from a variety of sources. They find a balance between studying the problem and solving it. They readily commit to action and make decisions that reflect sound judgment.*

A sample of the associated behavioral indicators of this competency are:

- Analyzes and anticipates unintended consequences when making recommendations or decisions.
- Steps back from the issue to see the big picture; considers the broader picture and potential impact on stakeholders, customers and the organization when making decisions.
- Surfaces and solves problems in a timely manner; clearly decides and then willingly commits to action.

## Competencies:

- Active listening
- Communicativeness
- Presentation skills
- Problem-solving and decision-making
- Assertiveness
- Conflict management
- Relationship building
- Team player
- Change mastery
- Influence
- Organizing and planning
- Composure
- Initiative
- Results orientation
- Drive and energy



Badge example:  
Relationship building , level 2

## Assessment Approach

Central to the CORE program is its emphasis on behavioral assessment: actual demonstrations of what students can do in a simulated work setting. At the start of the CORE program, students take part in the CORE 1000 Initial Assessment course, which is a one-day, eight-hour assessment of 15 competencies in the CORE model.

During the eight-hour assessment process, six students are assessed by three trained assessors and the director of the assessment center. Students work in groups to complete various tasks, sometimes cooperatively, other times competitively. In addition to two group activities, they must complete four individual activities. Each of the competencies, except for one, is included in at least two activities, and each activity may include a number of different competencies.

After the assessment, the assessors and director meet for an entire day for “data integration,” in which students are scored on a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being “needs development” and 5 being “exceeds standards.” The assessors must use observed evidence to arrive at the given score, and they must reach consensus in their decisions for each student.

The quality of the assessment process is assured and maintained through the participation of the assessment center director (two Lipscomb faculty have been trained for this role). The director prepares the assessors, provides

instructions for students and assessors throughout the assessment day, observes the assessment process, and scores the participants along with the assessors. The following day, the director leads the data integration session, reviews the assessors’ evaluations and scores, and mediates discussion between assessors when scores vary. This process is in place in order to assure that there is consistency with the groups that have previously been assessed through the center, and that there is sufficient rigor and integrity in the assessment model.

Based on the assessment scores, the students are awarded digital badges for each competency that was demonstrated; the badge also indicates the level of the competency that was demonstrated. Students can take these badges back to their employers as evidence of their various competencies. The badges can also be transcribed for credits hours as the appropriate, corresponding course and can count towards a bachelor of professional studies in organizational leadership or a bachelor of arts or science in integrated studies. Students have the potential to earn up to 30 credits through the one-day assessment, which can reduce the time to a degree by one full year. After the student is told what badges were earned, a degree plan can be made with the assistance of the program director.

## Curriculum

For students who did not demonstrate competencies at the desired or required levels, the CORE program offers competency development modules. These courses are online and self-paced modules that are designed to cover each competency at each level and include readings, videos, online simulations, and other activities under the guidance of a faculty coach. Based on the outcome of the initial assessment, students may register for elementary, applied, advanced, or strategic levels of a competency; in this way, the program meets the students where they are and does not require them to relearn skills that they have already demonstrated through the assessments. Students work through each module at their own pace; they can take as long as six months, but might spend as few as two weeks attaining certain competencies.

To satisfy both employer needs and the needs of the bachelor's degree program, Lipscomb has developed a range of competency development modules, all of which are offered online. These

modules are offered at the 3000 level as main offerings for degree seekers, but Lipscomb can also offer them at different levels for employer-based trainings. A faculty coach is assigned to each content area. Once the faculty coach confirms that a competency has been sufficiently developed, the student returns to the assessment center where their skills are evaluated individually by assessors—academically qualified faculty or staff other than their faculty coach—through single activities instead of a full assessment day. All of the competency development modules undergo the same evaluation as other courses at Lipscomb.

Badges can be awarded for all competencies starting at level one, but must be at a level two for undergraduate credit. The badges hold great appeal for employers, but they have value to the students as well. For this reason, students may not ever decide to have the competencies transcribed, but the structure is in place so that they can be when needed.

## Degree Program Structure

Lipscomb's bachelor of professional studies in organizational leadership requires 126 credits for graduation. Since students come to the program with an associate degree or equivalent, many of the degree credits are granted through transfer and traditional courses. A total of 45 credits are required in the competency-based model, of which up to 30 credits may be earned expressly through the CORE assessment center (the remainder of credits are earned through the competency development course approach). Students must demonstrate sufficient mastery of a predetermined set of eight competencies, representing six general leadership competencies and two that are competencies specific to their area of concentration. The 45 competency-based credits break down as follows:

- **18 Credits/Big 6 Competencies.** The six general competencies are common to each concentration within the

degree and are referred to as the “Big Six.” Each of the six competencies is equivalent to three credit hours, or 18 credits total. The student can take three-credit modules to develop each: relationship building, problem solving and decision making, organizing and planning, influence, communicativeness, and drive/energy.

- **24 Credits/Subject Matter Concentrations.** Students must also demonstrate two additional competencies tied to their 18-credit subject matter concentration (aging, business, psychology, restorative criminal justice, and customized concentrations). These competencies are also equivalent to three credits each. In addition, students must take six additional three-credit courses in their concentrations.

- **3-Credit Capstone.** Students also must complete an integrated capstone assessment project worth three credits. The capstone is a project that is customized to the student's individual aspirations and career goals. It is a project that requires the student to demonstrate the softer skills targeted by the behavioral assessments as well as the specific knowledge and competencies required by the subject matter concentration. For example, a student veteran with a customized concentration in "law, justice and society," with

the goal of law school or employment in a legislative policy role, had a capstone project requiring him to survey recent veterans on their re-acclimation process and produce a report that includes recommendations for policy change to support returning veterans.

To fulfill all 126 credits required for the degree, students can apply some of the additional credits earned through the CORE assessment (i.e., beyond the competencies targeted in the eight required for the degree), general education, and a required number of Bible courses.

## Faculty and Assessors

The role of the faculty in CBE differs greatly from that of faculty within traditional models, in that they serve either as mentors/coaches or assessors.

Program administrators found the identification of faculty to be somewhat challenging in that the academic qualifications for developing particular competencies do not exist, so the process was somewhat subjective. "No one has a PhD in problem solving," notes Long. In order to identify faculty, the program director consulted the provost, who examined the various behavioral indicators and learning outcomes, and then identified candidates based on previous faculty evaluations. The program director also met with deans to identify faculty with relevant skill sets to serve as assessor and coaches.

Faculty mentors/coaches have the potential to be paid significantly more by teaching in the CORE program than if they were to take on an additional course in their own academic area. This is the result of a pay-for-performance system that allows faculty mentor/coaches to receive additional compensation based on the

students' success in demonstrating the competencies. For this reason, the coaches are given some training on the model and the tools, but they are kept away from the assessment itself so that there is no danger of teaching to the test.

Assessors, on the other hand, are a mix of faculty, academically qualified staff, and industry professionals. Having industry representatives participate in the assessment process has offered a valuable perspective, says Long. But because industry professionals are not necessarily "academically qualified" but rather are masters degreed and professionally qualified, the assessments never have more than one on the three-person assessor team. All assessors participate in a two-day, 16-hour training on the assessment process, which covers note taking, creation of narratives, and accurate non-objective scoring. This training is key for ensuring inter-rater reliability and avoiding bias. Long reports that once the faculty understands the CORE model, they start to take the assessment approaches back to their own programs. Assessors are paid for each session.

## Cost and Pricing / Sustainability

The cost of developing a new CBE program based on the Polaris® business model includes the purchasing of the rights to the competencies, staff trainings, a behavioral assessment center with a one-way glass window, course design and development, and staff time. The estimated out-of-pocket costs to Lipscomb were around \$70,000. The program did not receive any grant funding for the program's development. Dean Long sees this as an investment in intellectual property that Lipscomb expects to use in working with local employers.

Students pay a fee of \$1500 for the initial assessment, during which they have the opportunity to earn up to 30 credits. Given that Lipscomb's tuition for adult degree programs is \$499 per credit hour, the assessment fee represents huge cost-savings

for the student but a potential loss of one year of tuition for the institution. However, this deficit has been viewed at Lipscomb as the cost of getting into the market for the non-traditional student and is expected to be offset by the 30-40 credits that the students will subsequently earn at the regular price of tuition. With this model, the student may potentially save up to \$11,770 in tuition and three semesters of time (see pricing scenarios table). The program is currently self-supporting and sustainable. Additional revenue is also being generated by corporate partners who are utilizing the assessment center and development modules to augment their existing in-house training and professional development initiatives.

**Table 1. Pricing Scenarios**

	Assessment fees	Transcription fee	Tuition price for remaining 66 credit hours	Total price of degree	Student savings	Time savings (Assumes 10 credits/semester, six semesters total, for non-competency Adult Degree Program)
Final 60 credits of bachelor's degree at Lipscomb through non-competency Adult Degree Program			=66*499 = \$32,934	\$32,934		
Earn 6 credits through all day assessment	\$1500	\$340	=60*499 =\$29,940	\$31,780	\$1,154 (4%)	.5 semesters
Earn 15 credits through all day assessment	\$1500	\$850	=51*499 =\$25,499	\$27,799	\$5,135 (16%)	1.5 semesters
Earn 21 credits through all day assessment (current average)	\$1500	\$1190	=45*499 =\$22,455	\$25,145	\$7,789 (24%)	2 semesters
Earn 30 credits through all day assessment	\$1500	\$1700	=36*499 =\$17,964	\$21,164	\$11,770 (36%)	3 semesters

## Accreditation and Financial Aid

For Lipscomb's innovative CBE program, getting accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) was a journey in and of itself. Lipscomb plans to propose a full direct assessment bachelor's degree program soon but decided to start the process with this course-based, credit-based CBE model. The current program is more of a blended approach, combining assessment-based credits tied to specific courses in the curriculum with more traditional course-based credits. Lipscomb received SACSCOC approval of the CORE bachelor's degree in professional studies on December 19, 2013.

Because the CORE program is still closely tied to the credit hour, the program meets Title IV rules and regulations for federal financial aid. Lipscomb continues to work toward a model of the CORE program that can be entirely assessment-based and that can meet U.S. Department of Education guidelines for a "direct assessment" program.

### What Is "Direct Assessment"?

The U.S. Department of Education defines a direct assessment program as "an instructional program that, in lieu of credit hours or clock hours as a measure of student learning, utilizes direct assessment of student learning, or recognizes the direct assessment of student learning by others" (Direct Assessment Programs, 2014) Programs that use assessment only, with no references back to the credit hour, can be designated as Direct Assessment programs by the department. With this special designation, direct assessment program students can be eligible for federal financial aid. The first two programs to be awarded the Direct Assessment designation are Southern New Hampshire University's College for America and Capella University's FlexPath.

## Issues and Challenges

Besides the long wait for the ruling on accreditation, the biggest challenges in launching the CORE program at Lipscomb involved institutional policies, culture, and finance. CORE was an approach to education and workforce development that was new in terms of structure and in terms of recognition of students' learning regardless of how or where that learning took place. The different structure required revisiting and amending some academic policies and procedures that were not completely in line with a competency-base program; changes needed to be made to accommodate a different pricing model, new forms of assessment, and a different way of tracking academic outcomes.

The CORE program's focus on recognizing student learning—rather than seat time or course-based measures—was a different sort of challenge internally. Some Lipscomb faculty

expressed some suspicion, if not resistance, regarding CORE's awarding of credit for learning that takes place outside of the classroom. Some of the faculty's concerns were addressed by training faculty to understand and use other methods of prior learning assessment, such as portfolio assessment, and slowly introducing more innovative concepts as they were acknowledged by staff to be credible.

Finally, there were also financial considerations. In addition to the institution leadership's concerns about "giving up" 30 credit hours worth of tuition through assessment, Lipscomb did not want the new CORE program to be in competition with the in-house traditional model or with community colleges in the area. So, special care was taken to target a very particular market of non-traditional learners.



## Student Outreach, Enrollment, and Outcomes

The CORE program targets students with an associate degree or equivalent, plus at least two years of work experience. Lipscomb recruiters do not encourage all students to enroll in the CORE degree program; rather, they present it alongside more traditional adult degrees, custom baccalaureate degrees, and other options. The goal is to make sure that the CORE program is right for the student.

The program is still very new. As of March 2014, 63 students had gone through the CORE Assessment and Development Center. The average number of credits earned by students at the center is 21; 17 of the first 63 students have earned the full 30 credits through the center. In addition, the students have earned a total of 441

badges. If those students opt to have all of these badges transcribed for credit, they will have earned the equivalent of approximately 1,323 credits and student cost-savings of \$585,207. Lipscomb's expectations for future enrollment are, within three years, 90 students from employers and 200 students for the degree program. Long believes that, given the program's structure, it has the capacity to scale up to serve 1,000 students.

Ongoing, the program will be tracking and reporting internally on a number of measures including the number of degree-seeking students, retention, graduation rates, time to degree, and cost of the degree.

## An Eye to the Future

As the CORE program grows and as its students progress towards a degree, Lipscomb is learning from the experiences of the students through research. Internal studies are examining the outcomes of the CORE students compared to students in the more traditional adult degree programs, the value of badges for degree completion, and the impact of the CORE assessment process for employer clients in terms of employee retention and succession planning. Lipscomb is also discussing with the Tennessee Higher Education Commission an experimental project to test how

the CORE approach could be incorporated into high school and community college curricula, using lower levels of badges.

CORE program designers are excited about the various options that students can have through the CORE program, and the institution is currently planning to expand the model to additional degree options, including a fully assessment-based ("direct assessment") degree program.

For more information about the Lipscomb CORE program, see [www.lipscomb.edu/competency](http://www.lipscomb.edu/competency).

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