

Competency-Based Transcripts

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By **Paul Fain**

Students who enroll in a new competency-based program at Northern Arizona University will earn a second transcript, which will describe their proficiency in the online bachelor degree's required concepts. The university will also teach students how to share their "competency report" transcripts with potential employers.

The university shared a sample version of a competency report. The document looks nothing like its traditional counterpart, and lacks courses or grades.

Northern Arizona's first crack at a transcript grounded in competencies gives an early glimpse of how credentialing in higher education might be shifting, experts said. And while the competency reports could be improved, some said, the university also deserves credit (no pun intended) for attempting to better-define what students do to earn their degrees.

"Our employer studies show that employers basically find the transcript useless in evaluating job candidates," Carol Geary Schneider, president of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, said in an e-mail message. "Higher education definitely needs to start fresh with a redesign of its public descriptions of student accomplishment."

Clifford Adelman agrees. Adelman is a senior associate at the Institute for Higher Education Policy and an expert on credentialing. He suggested several possible upgrades to a sample competency-based transcript from Northern Arizona, particularly the use of more specific language and fewer "generalized verbs." But Adelman also said the university was headed in the right direction.

"God bless them for actually trying," he said. "These are more effective statements than listing courses."

Northern Arizona is one of three universities that have jumped headfirst into competency-based education by offering "direct assessment" academic programs, which are self-paced and completely untethered from the credit hour.

The other two are Southern New Hampshire University's new College for America, an associate degree-granting institution, and Capella University, which recently launched a batch of experimental business degree courses.

These programs differ from a larger number of similar competency-based offerings, including those from Western Governors University and "flex" options from the University of Wisconsin System, which are still officially linked in some way to the credit hour standard.

The competency-based approach has critics, some of whom say its focus on industrial-style efficiencies will shortchange lower-income students.

Even so, more colleges will get into the direct-assessment game soon, experts predict.

Several institutions are mulling how to create competency-based transcripts, said Michael Offerman, a former Capella official who has consulted with the Lumina Foundation on the emerging approach. Some of those efforts will draw from Lumina's Degree Qualifications Profile, which attempts to describe what learning should go into a credential.

Offerman said the ultimate goal is a clickable, web-based transcript for competency-based programs.

Northern Arizona's accreditor, the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, in May gave a green light to the university's initial batch of "Personalized Learning" bachelor's degrees, which are in computer information technology, liberal arts and small business administration.

So far 100 students are in the process of registering for the fully online program, said Fred Hurst, senior vice president of Northern Arizona's extended campuses. The university hopes to enroll 500 students in the competency-based tracks by the end of the year, and is looking to recruit nationally.

Competency of Mastery?

Northern Arizona is currently in discussions with the U.S. Department of Education about the program. The department could soon allow federal financial aid to flow to students enrolled in it. College for America received the feds' endorsement earlier this year.

Hurst said the public university views its new competency-based project as an "innovation lab," which it will continue to tweak and improve. But the program is up and running, and university officials said they want it to be as substantial as it is experimental.

"This is a different model altogether," said Hurst.

Students work toward earning the Personalized Learning degrees by successfully completing assignments and assessments that are designed to measure their proficiency in cross-disciplinary concepts. The lessons are automated, but students can interact with university instructors or their peers in online "social spaces."

Tuition for the competency-based option is \$2,500 for a six-month subscription. Students can move as fast as they want through the course material and lessons, as long as they prove competency in each learning outcome.

Faculty members deem competency as being an 86 percent level of mastery. But students can go deeper, with the option of taking mastery assignments that show a higher level of comprehension.

"Mastery demands more complex application of the subject matter through an additional test, presentation, paper, case study or other form of assessment," according to the university.

Students will be able to display their achievements, including areas where they went above and beyond with either partial or full mastery, in the university-issued competency reports. They will also receive conventional transcripts, however.

Faculty members designed the web-accessible reports, which describe the concepts and theories students have either mastered or demonstrated proficiency in.

A sample transcript (a snippet of which can be seen in the illustration) is for a graduate who majored in liberal arts and minored in small business administration. It includes checkmarks for each competency, bubbles with numbers that indicate each partial mastery, and stars for full mastery.



Compose academic essays in various rhetorical styles

Write a summary of a major position in Weber, Veblen, Cooley, and Mead and a research proposal and paper in a liberal arts discipline with an annotated bibliography.



Demonstrate knowledge of potential and limitations of technology's advances

Demonstrate understanding of impacts of technology on institutions and humanity. Discuss impact of technology on facets of psychology and Sociology, the perpetuation of stereotypes through technology and possible changes in human nature and ethics due to technology.



Practice an examined or self-reflective life

Discuss a personal statement of the importance of literature, film, and art in understanding human nature; also discuss a personal statement about film's impact in understanding culture. Journal about the meaning of life, explore connections between religion and art and explore connections between history and art/literature.

For example, the hypothetical student earned full mastery status in each lesson under the heading "compose academic essays in various rhetorical styles." The student wrote a "summary of a major position in Weber, Veblen, Cooley and Mead," according to the brief enclosed explanation, as well as a "research proposal and paper in a liberal arts discipline with an annotated bibliography."

Schneider had two main critiques for an earlier draft of the sample transcript. First, she said the areas of study needed brief descriptions of the purpose of academic programs to "set a context for the specific competencies."

More importantly, Schneider said she wanted to see descriptions of significant work the student accomplished in a program. Adelman echoed that view.

"Did she do projects? Research? A portfolio? Community service? Internships? One or more culminating or capstone assignments? What questions and problems did she pursue through her studies?" asked Schneider. "Detailing specific competencies is a good exercise for guiding curricular and pedagogical planning. But it doesn't answer my questions about what kinds of sophisticated work the student has successfully learned to do."

Two Transcripts, One Degree

A challenge for institutions with competency-based programs, particularly the direct assessment variety, is ensuring that students get credit for their work if they transfer out before earning a credential. Graduates could also face hurdles if they try to move on to graduate programs at other institutions.

Officials at Northern Arizona are confident that they have figured out how to avoid potential transfer problems.

"We spent a lot of time ensuring that our students would not be trapped in that situation," Hurst said.

The solution, he said, hinged on work faculty members did to "deconstruct" traditional courses. They mapped the learning outcomes from those three-credit offerings to competencies in the new online programs.

When students complete those lessons they automatically earn credit equivalencies for the conventional courses. So when they master the various elements that make up, say, accounting 204, Hurst said that course automatically pops up as being completed on an online dashboard students can access.

That mapping process is similar to the credit-hour links that institutions with other, non-direct assessment programs make in competency-based education. But in Northern Arizona's case the work is done for students' traditional transcripts, rather than for earning approval from accreditors or the Education Department.

However, the university hopes both students and employers will use the competency reports. Alison Brown, associate vice president of Northern Arizona's extended campuses, said the university would offer students training and tips about the documents.

"We think employers eventually will like that transcript better," she said.

For now the university is covering its bases with both versions. One reason is that Northern Arizona wants to assure students that their competency-based credentials are just as real as those earned in the university's brick-and-mortar degree tracks.

"While the experience of Personalized Learning is different, the degree you earn is not," the university says on its website. "Your degree comes from a public, accredited university with more than 100 years of academic excellence."

Competency Report

Liberal arts *Major*
Small Business Administration *Minor*

WHAT ARE COMPETENCIES?

Each bold title listed below is a **Competency** – a skill or conceptual understanding demonstrated by all graduates of NAU Personalized Learning. To earn his or her degree, this student demonstrated proficiency in all competencies listed here through analysis or application of the subject matter described. Competencies are intentionally cross-disciplinary, and consistently reinforce how students can apply multiple approaches to solving real-world problems.

WHAT IS MASTERY?

After taking each lesson, a student may optionally attempt to show **Mastery** by demonstrating high-level comprehension of the material. Mastery demands more complex application of the subject matter through an additional test, presentation, paper, case study, or other form of assessment. By choosing to attempt and successfully complete a mastery assignment, the student has demonstrated personal initiative and knowledge relevant to their career and personal development. You can see which competencies contain mastered lessons in the column at left.

COMPETENCY REPORT KEY:



Competency

Student has demonstrated competency in this area.



Lessons Mastered
(6 available)

Partial Mastery

Student has put in additional work to master some lessons within this area.



Lessons Mastered
(4 available)

Full Mastery

Student has gone above and beyond, mastering every Lesson within this area.

Major (Liberal Arts)

2

Lessons Mastered
(3 available)

Work in a team structure

Identify key concepts and theories in Group Dynamics, identify key concepts and theories in intercultural communication and engage in intelligent, rational discussion about contemporary issues concerning work.



Communicate with diverse populations

Identify key concepts and theories in Social Conflict using analysis, interpretation, and evaluation. Demonstrate understanding of rhetorical strategies using analysis, interpretation, and evaluation. Define major terms and concepts related to intercultural communication.

2

Lessons Mastered
(5 available)

Analyze complicated materials

Analyze paintings and literature along with major themes in Marx, Spencer, Durkheim, and Simmel. Evaluate the differences between cognition and perception and analyze theories of human nature. Discuss emerging narrative and ideological components of postwar film and world literature. Demonstrate an understanding and knowledge of Film Noir, "Nations at War in the Middle East" and of the Cold War and its aftermath.



Write about culture effectively

Write a summary of a major position in Social Psychology, a clear analysis of victimization, and a position paper based on an argument.



Lessons Mastered
(2 available)

Compose academic essays in various rhetorical styles

Write a summary of a major position in Weber, Veblen, Cooley, and Mead and a research proposal and paper in a liberal arts discipline with an annotated bibliography.



Lesson Mastered
(1 available)

Demonstrate knowledge of potential and limitations of technology's advances

Demonstrate understanding of impacts of technology on institutions and humanity. Discuss impact of technology on facets of psychology and Sociology, the perpetuation of stereotypes through technology and possible changes in human nature and ethics due to technology.



Lesson Mastered
(2 available)

Practice an examined or self-reflective life

Discuss a personal statement of the importance of literature, film, and art in understanding human nature; also discuss a personal statement about film's impact in understanding culture. Journal about the meaning of life, explore connections between religion and art and explore connections between history and art/literature.



Lessons Mastered
(2 available)

Describe ethical theories

Use a social theorist to describe "ethics" and "morality" in multiple applications and analyze moral conflicts.

1

Lesson Mastered
(2 available)

Apply ethical theories to education

Explain the ethical and moral arguments for desegregation and for technology in education.



Lessons Mastered
(3 available)

Formulate and substantiate theses

Formulate hypotheses about literary and social theories. Apply theories of intercultural communication identifying places of success and failure.

4

Lessons Mastered
(6 available)

Formulate and test hypotheses in humanities and social science

Formulate and test hypotheses in humanities and in social science and formulate a theory about political events.



Demonstrate knowledge of leadership in the working of organizations

Describe diverse types of organizations and distinguish between them.



Demonstrate knowledge of the significance of the humanities

Examine theories of subjectivity, personal identity, and human nature in the Humanities. Identify and discuss the aesthetic components of films.

2

Lessons Mastered
(8 available)

Demonstrate knowledge of the significance of the social sciences

Discuss two effects criminology has had on the both the penal and legal system. Demonstrate knowledge about the importance of recovery in East Revolutions and Asia to economic or social life in the United States.