

A STUDY ON “ESSENTIALITY OF COMPETENCY BASED LEARNING FOR POST GRADUATE STUDENTS”

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this manuscript is to describe a competency-based learning or approach to designing and assessing master’s level professional preparation programs in the field of higher education administration. Given the absence of a universal set of competencies defined for HEA master’s degree programs, the authors draw from the CAHEP (2010) and Wright (2007) general guidelines for HEA graduate programs, and the literature pertaining to graduate competencies and outcomes that are specific to early career student affairs positions. The competency based assessment models for master’s level graduate programs, and has utility for faculty and administration seeking to assess professional master’s programs, especially those that lack nationally defined standards or certification.

Keywords: *higher education administration, competency-based learning, post graduate programs.*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

In contrast to the liberal arts and social sciences (Voorhes, 2001), professional academic fields are characterized by “specialized competence, acquired as the result of intellectual training” (Carr-saunders & Wilson, 1933, p.307). Graduate professional schools are charged to “inculcate knowledge of the theory and practice so that the candidates of the profession are sufficiently competent for practice in the respective field” (Sun, 2004, p.6). In the professions, this notion of competency is a central principle to guide academic program development, as well as the evaluation of student learning and success.

Competencies are defined as the “integration of skills, abilities and knowledge as focused on a particular task” (U.S. Department of Education, 2001, p.1) and are easily measured (Voorhees, 2001). Although the terms “competency and outcomes” are often used interchangeably (Banta, 2001) and some argue that no real differences exist between outcome versus competency-based education in practice (e.g., Morcke, Dornan & Eika, 2013), the model described here focuses on competencies for three reasons. First, in higher education, student outcomes often also encompass retention, graduation and placement rates, which do not necessarily reflect mastery of skills or knowledge (Voorhees, 2001). Second, “competency” implies expertise that is directly transferrable to a specific employment field (Banta, 2001), which is why it lends itself especially well to professional graduate programs (Bilder & Conrad, 1996). Finally, curriculum design and assessment can be integrated with one another around competencies, creating a coherent and consistent language from which teachers and learners can work.

Implementing a competency based approach to professional academic programs begins by conceptually defining intended competencies. These definitions should be specific enough to facilitate assessment (Voorhees, 2001).

Often, competencies are designed around standards identifies by national professional organizations, such as the council of Social work degrees (Meyer-Adams, Potts, Koob, Dorsey & Rosales, 2011), the American Society for training and development for master's in workforce training and development degrees (Gaudent, Annulis & Kmiec, 2008), and the council for the advancement of standards (CAS) in higher education for master's in student affairs degrees (Kuk & Banning, 2009). For fields lacking national guidelines, however, intended outcomes and competencies are less prescribed. Also, while such external guidelines provide helpful benchmarks, they are not necessarily ongoing or fully reflective of an individuals' program's own goals, as well as those set forth by the department, college and institution. Program faculty and other stakeholders must therefore draw from external, as well as internal resources to reach consensus about the competencies that graduates should possess (Voorhees, 2001).

After defining competencies, the next step is to determine how they will be developed in learners. Faculty should map them onto courses and associated learning activities, and ensure that academic content is aligned with the competencies (Bers, 2001). Identifying how competencies will be measured is critical. Professional graduate degree program administrators and faculty often rely on external evaluation metrics (e.g., rankings, accreditation, program reviews, certification or licensure examinations) (Funk and Klomparens, 2006). In addition, programs (especially those in fields without nationally defined competency standards and associated measures) often rely on internally defined competencies and evaluations to collect data pertaining to the types of competencies described above; that is, student, alumni, and / or faculty self-reported perceptions of learning (e.g., Delaney, 1997; Gaudet, Annulis & Kmiec, 2008; Meyers-Adams, 2011) and / or program quality (e.g., Delaney, 1997; Ketefian & Hagerty, 1987). While self-reports promote reflective practice (Walser, 2009), many students are not aware of the full benefits associated with their graduate degree experience until after graduation (Bilder & Conrad, 1996). For this reason, supplementing perceptions and satisfaction with direct measures of competency is essential to comprehensive program evaluation (Maki, 2001).

The peer-reviewed scholarship pertaining to designing and implementing competency-based assessment models for master's level graduate programs, especially those that focus on professional practice (e.g., social work, education and nursing), is limited (Kaylor & Johnson, 1994). The competency based approach described here contributes to this gap and has utility for faculty and administrations seeking to assess professional master's programs, especially those that lack nationally defined standards or certification. The remaining discussion is organized as follows: after a brief explanation of the field of higher education administration, the authors describe their specific program, how they developed expected competencies for the program, identifies where the competencies would be addressed in the curriculum, and designed methods to measure the competencies. The conclusion emphasizes the importance of communicating with internal and external stakeholders about the model, with an aim towards developing a competency-based program culture.

1.1 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY.

The first-degree program in Higher Education was implemented at Clark University in 1893 (Goodchild, 2013 for history of the field). No external accrediting body exists for the field, but today there are approximately 161 universities in the U.S that offer a doctoral and / or master's degree in Higher Education Administration (HEA) is a specialized field of study that is "concerned with the behavioural interaction of students, faculty and administrators within the context of a college or university environment, and the interrelationship of this environment with the larger society". Typically, course work encompasses the history and philosophy of higher education, administration and leadership, finance, law, policy and organizational change / development. Master's degree graduates enter a range of positions within 2 and 4 year colleges and universities, including admissions, orientation, advising, human resources, financial aid, intercollegiate athletics, and student affairs, as well as other profit and non-profit organizations with higher education.

Beginning in 1964, what is known as the Council of the advancement of standards in Higher education established guidelines specific to masters-level college student's personnel and student affairs professional preparation programs. While the outcomes associated with these standards have been studied extensively, including surveys of faculty about their graduates' outcomes, there has been little empirical consideration of the application and use of these standards within master's degree programs themselves. DiRamio (2013) sampled 44 student affairs graduate programs and observed less than half advertised on their websites that they used the CAS standards.

2.0 REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In some professions, including HEA, no separate accrediting agencies or certification body exists to define expected student outcomes associated with master's degrees. Creating a culture that values defining and assessing competencies in nonetheless imperative for programs in these fields, especially given public attention to hold postsecondary education writ large more accountable. To promote a competency-based culture, implementing the type of assessment plan described here should be accompanied by strategies to communicate with external as well as internal stakeholders (Bers, 2001).

External audiences with an interest in program competencies include prospective students, employers, policy makers, and the general public. To inform these groups, the HEA program's promotional materials and public websites includes an explanation of the competencies. When recommending students for jobs in conversation with employers or in written letters, faculty and program administrators describe the competency models and the types of skills and knowledge that graduate possess. The program also provides a summary of assessment results in annual reports that are publicly available. Strategies to communicate with internal stakeholders are similarly important. Faculty are stewards of student learning who should have ongoing input in how competencies frame the curriculum. At the beginning of each academic year, the HEA master's program convenes a meeting of all tenure and non-tenure line faculty to solicit feedback on how well the competencies align with their individual courses and whether adjustments are necessary. Being able to define, explain and demonstrate competencies is valuable for students as they seek employment. In the HEA master's program, faculty socialize their students to this model early. Prospective students are provided with an overview of the competencies in information sessions and program materials.

The required new student orientation includes a discussion of what the program competencies are, how they are developed and assessed across coursework, and how they connect to career success post-graduation. All new students subsequently are asked to complete the pre-program survey. They are involved in the introduction to Higher Education course in their first semester, where the final project and its associated rubric are aligned with the program competencies.

LITERATURE GAP

The competency-based approach described here offers a template for higher education administration master's degree programs, as well as those in other fields that lack nationally set standards. Expanding enrolments, coupled with intense calls for accountability at all levels of higher education, require master's program faculty and administrators to ensure that students possess demonstrable knowledge, skills, and abilities that will lead to career success.

3.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study as emphasised on empirical and descriptive study. In the study, the discussions are based on competency-based learning and its role in studying master's degree. It has also emphasised to know the perception of competency based approach for post graduate students and whether there is any impact on it for their purpose of study.

3.1 NEED OF THE STUDY

The two versions developed: a pre-test for incoming students and a post-test for graduating students. Students are invited to participate in the pre-survey prior to the start of their first semester in the program. Likewise, graduating students are asked to complete the post-survey at the conclusion of their final semester of the program. Program faculty then compare the corresponding responses to determine whether significant changes in self-perceived competency is occurred or not.

3.2 OBJECTIVES

Primary Objectives,

- To analyse the effectiveness of competency based learning for master's degree students.

Secondary Objectives,

- To identify the role of master's degree preparation of higher education professionals.
- To know the students, teachers, and parent's perception on higher education.
- To analyse the impact of master's degree preparation of higher educational professionals.

3.3 SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The study is purely confined to know the role of competency based learning of the post graduate student

3.4 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

- Time constraint.
- Financial constraint.
- The information obtained is from secondary source. Hence, the accuracy of the information is limited.

4.0 METHODS AND CRITERIA TO ASSESS COMPETENCIES.

This assessment approach blends direct and indirect methods. Direct assessment involves experts reviewing artifacts produced by students (e.g., exams, papers, portfolios, projects and presentations) to determine whether they demonstrate mastery of competencies, while indirect assessments capture students' self-reported perceptions of their skills, knowledge and learning experiences (e.g., surveys, focus groups and exit interviews) (Maki, 2010).

DIRECT METHODS OF ASSESSMENT

Arizona State University's master's program curriculum is divided into a core of twelve required credits and a menu of structured electives from which students may choose the remaining eighteen credits. The authors mapped the competencies onto the requirements, ensuring that the main course assignments (as indicated in figure 2., Appendix A) reflected the identified knowledge and skills.

The authors developed three rubrics to directly assess how well students' three core assignments demonstrated the competencies (Mertler, 2001). The rubrics rely on a non-linear design to assess the extent to which student performance is related to multiple broad standards for competencies. They were designed to be criterion referenced, such that level of competence is not evaluated according to fellow students' performance (i.e., content validity), and clear distinctions are made between performance according to standards set by the program leadership (Mager, 1997). All components of the rubric measure the objective of a specialized knowledge or skill associated with the core curriculum (i.e., content validity), and clear distinctions are made between performance levels for each of the criteria being assessed to help ensure accurate, consistent, and fair assessment. The rubrics are provided in Appendix B.

INDIRECT METHODS OF ASSESSMENT

Many institutions use commercially developed indirect assessment tools, such as the National Survey of Student Engagement, or internally developed instruments like course evaluations or exit surveys (Hogan, Lusher & Mondal, 2012). These measures do not typically focus on field-specific competencies, so the authors created a survey instrument tailored to the program's needs. The instruments design with a series of focus groups with students and alumni to better ascertain their experiences in the program, generally, as well as identify possible competencies not initially identified through the literature review and faculty discussions. The multiple iterations of the instruments, which included student feedback and pilot testing, ultimately produced a four-part online survey that sought information from students on their perceptions of competencies, as well as professional experiences, career plans and aspirations, and demographics. The items are pertaining to competencies are listed in Appendix C.

APPENDIX A.

Figure 1. Master's Degree in Higher & Postsecondary Education Core competencies.

Specialized knowledge associated with core curriculum.

- K1.** Mission and values of Higher Education: Analyse the mission, purpose and goals of Higher education and how administration helps to advance institutional and Enterprise-wide outcomes (Wright, 2007).
- K2.** History of higher education: Demonstrate mastery of the historical foundations of American higher education and explain how historical influences can be observed in administrative practice today (CAHEP, 2010; Herdlien et al., 2013; Herdlien et al.,2010; Wright, 2007).
- K3.** Higher education stakeholders: understand the roles that faculty, administrators and staff, and students play in the functioning of American colleges and universities, and analyse contemporary issues confronting each of these stakeholder groups (Herdlien et al., 2013).
- K4.** Higher Education Administrative Theory: Recognize, explain and apply the key theoretical frameworks that guide administrative practice in higher education (CAHEP, 2009; Herdlien et al., 2013).
- K5.** Ethics of Practice: Recognize, explain and apply the ethical codes of conduct that guide administrative practice in higher education (Herdlien et al., 2013; Herdlien et al., 2010).
- K6.** Methods of inquiry: Demonstrate knowledge of action-based methods of inquiry And how to use these to design best-practice, innovative solutions in higher Education administrative practice (Herdlien et al., 2013; Herdlien et al, 2010; Wright, 2007).

Specialized Skills and Abilities associated with Core Curriculum.

- SA1.** Data driven decision making and problem solving: Ability to identify problems of practice within a higher education functional unit (e.g., department, office) and analyse available data as well as action based methods of inquiry to implement best practice, creative solutions (Burkard et al., 2004; Herdlien et al.,2013; wright, 2007).
- SA2.** Innovation: ability to be innovative in administrative practice, applying new Technology and ideas to success in the profession (Wright, 2007).
- SA3.** Communication: demonstrate effective spoken and written communication Skills, as well as listening skills, that attend to a variety of audiences, including College students, faculty and administrators (Burkard et al., 2004; Herdlien et al., 2013; Herdlien et al., 2010, Wright, 2007).
- SA4.** Collaboration: ability to collaborate across functional lines and diverse Backgrounds, as well as cultivate professional relationships across institutions and Organizations (Burkard et al., 2004; Herdlien et al.,2013; Herdlien et al.,2010).
- SA5.** Reflective practice: Ability to engage in critical self-reflection and commit to Ongoing professional improvement (Herdlien et al.,2013; Herdlien et al.,2004; Wright, 2007).

Figure 2. Core Assignments for direct assessment of competencies.

Course Title	Artifact	Description
Introduction to higher education	Higher education presentation	This project traces the history, present status, and future trends pertaining to (a) an important current or emerging topic in higher education, or (b) a practice based area of higher education that they aspire to or currently work in. It takes the form of a 20-30-minute presentation recorded and uploaded to the internet, requiring students to innovatively incorporate the use of technology.
Practicum	Practicum placement reflection paper	This is a substantive paper that is reflective of content learned during structured practical experience in a college or university setting, supervised by practitioner and / or faculty member with whom the student works closely. The reflection paper describes each individuals journey through the experience and how it affected his / her professional identity development.
Applied inquiry and project	Action-oriented research project	This project is a small-scale applied study performed in a higher education setting. The student either: 1- has an opportunity to initiate a small change (the action) and evaluate the immediate local consequences (the research), or 2- has an opportunity to investigate a practice based problem (the research) and suggests specific opportunities for practitioners to ameliorate the empirically defined issues (the action). The results of the applied projects are documented through a research paper (similar to a professional conference paper), which describes the setting, the need, the action taken, and the short- term results of the study, as well as a poster presentation.

APPENDIX B.

Core Project Rubrics

Core Project # 1: Higher Education Presentation

Content and associated competencies	1 - Inadequate	2 - Acceptable	3 - Excellent
Introduction Provides introduction to topic / practice-based area K3, SA3.	Has basic understanding of the topic / practice based area.	Describes the topic/practice based area with some comprehension of level of complexity	Describes the topic/practice-based area with a full understanding of level of complexity.
Historical connections Traces the history (past and present) of the topic/practice based area K2	Recognizes basic historical elements pertinent to the topic/practice based area.	provides some evidence of understanding patterns, cause/effect relationships and critical indicators related to the topic/practice based area.	Understands and articulates patterns, cause/effect relationships and critical indicators related to the topic/practice base area.
Literature review Incorporates and addresses relevant connections to key sources. SA1	Makes relevant connections to a convenient sample of sources, however the sources presented are notable incomplete or lacking key information	Makes relevant connections to various sources, however the presentation of pertinent information is missing some key aspects.	Makes relevant connections to a comprehensive collection of key sources.
Originality and innovation Identifies potential future trends of the topic/practice base area K2, SA2	Minimally identifies implications, recommendations and future trends. Ideas do not evidence originality thinking but may not be fully developed or clearly articulated	can predict and evaluate a limited scope of implications, recommendations and future trends. Ideas evidence original thinking but may not be fully developed or clearly articulated	can predict and evaluate a broad range of implications, recommendations and future trends, impressive originality of ideas
Conclusion provides synthesis and summary to conclude presentation	Provides minimal conclusive synthesis and summary of gathered	Summarizes key aspects of topic and provides some conclusive synthesis of	Fully synthesises gathered information and provides well-developed

SA3	information	gathered information	summary and conclusions
Organization and delivery Organizes and delivers presentation effectively SA3	Notable absence of organization and lack of a logical sequence of clearly expressed ideas. Students fail to capture and maintain audience attention	some lack of organization and / or occasional lack of logical sequence of ideas; student does not consistently capture audience attention throughout presentation	Presentation is well organized and follows a logical sequence of ideas throughout; student establishes and maintains audience attention throughout
Use of technology Uses appropriate and creative audio visuals (A/V) SA2	A/V lacks evidence of preparation and creativity	A/V shows some preparation and creativity	A/V is effective and carefully prepared, creativity evidenced

Core project # 2: Practicum Placement Reflection Paper

Content & Associated Competency	1 - Inadequate	2 - Acceptable	3 – Excellent
Stakeholder analysis Understanding of practicum placement K3	Has basic recognition of organizational structure and stakeholders with minimal evidence of higher level understanding	Recognizes organizational structure and stakeholders with some comprehension of level of associated complexities	describes organizational structure and stakeholders with a deep and nuanced understanding of associated complexities
Higher education theory and practice Makes connections to program content within higher education practice K1, K4, K5	Response is incomplete, lacking in connection to important ideas, concepts, and previous knowledge of issue pertaining to higher education theory and practice	response is adequate, with some meaningful connections to important ideas and concepts. Student response alludes to previous knowledge or larger issues pertaining to higher education theory and practice	response is through with meaningful connection to important ideas and concepts, student integrates previous knowledge and connects to larger issues pertaining to higher education
Reflective practice Engages in self-assessment	Response provides information about	Response describes, with some examples or comparisons how	Response describes, with special detail

SA5, K5	how understanding as changed, but lacks examples or comparison	understanding as changed	and examples and comparisons how understanding as changed
Professional development Commits to ongoing professional development SA4, SA5	Response alludes to questions or topics for future learning. However, student does not provide in-depth reflections on collaborative experiences, work environment, or the cultivation of professional relationships	Response mentions new topics or questions for future learning. Student generally reflects on collaborative experiences, work environment and the cultivation of professional relationships	Responses raises important questions for further exploration, learning or understanding. Student response shows evidence of ability to collaborate with others and cultivate professional relationships, critical analysis of work environment evidenced
APA Style Uses APA Style SA1	Frequent lack of appropriate APA formatting	Occasional lapses in use of APA format	Consistent use of APA format

Core Project # 3: Action-oriented Research Project

Content & associated competency	1 - Inadequate	2 - Acceptable	3 – Excellent
Research problem Identifies a problem, opportunity or challenge within the research literature. SA1	Has basic recognition of a problem, opportunity or challenge with minimal detail and understanding	Recognizes a problem, opportunity or challenge with some comprehension of level of complexity	Describes the problem and all component pieces with a full understanding of level of complexity
Theoretical framework Conceptually frames the research problem within an appropriate theoretical framework K4	Minimally incorporates theoretical frameworks in presentation of research problem; conceptual framing lacks comprehensiveness and connection to overall paper (data analysis, discussion, and conclusion)	Incorporates theoretical framework in presentation of research problem; appropriate application conceptual framing with some details and areas of connection in need of further development	Appropriately applies theoretical framework to research problem; fully develops conceptual framing with clear connections to overall paper (data analysis, discussion and conclusion)
Critical analysis Analyses the elements of a specific research problem SA1	Recognizes elements pertinent to the research problem, however there are frequent lapses in critical thinking skills (analysis, synthesis, evaluation, problem solving skills, ability to support opinions and justify choices)	Provides some evidence of understanding patterns, cause/effect relationships and critical indicators related to the research problem with only occasional lapses in critical thinking skills	Understands and articulates patterns, cause/effect relationships and critical indicators related to the current research problem. Shows evidence of well-developed critical thinking skills
Literature review Gathers relevant research literature SA1	Collects relevant research from a convenient sample of sources, however the reviewed literature as a notable absence of key information	Collects relevant research from various resources and databases, however some aspects of the review are absent	Collects a comprehensive collection of relevant research
Discussions and conclusions	Minimally identifies	can predict and evaluate a limited	can predict and evaluate a broad

Predicts and evaluates implications, recommendations and conclusions SA1	implications, recommendations and conclusions, ideas frequently underdeveloped	scope of implications, recommendations and conclusions. Ideas not always fully developed	range of implications, recommendations and conclusive; ideas fully developed
Use of academic English Organizes ideas well and uses appropriate academic register SA1	Notable absence of appropriate organisation and structure; flow of ideas is at times incoherent; frequently lacks appropriate, formal and precise register	Occasional lack of organization and appropriate structure; at times struggles with flow of ideas; and uses appropriate, formal and precise register most of the time	Well-organized and structured throughout; the flow of ideas is consistently logical; regular use of formal and precise register
APA Style Uses APA style SA1	Frequent lack of appropriate APA formatting	Occasional lapses in use of APA format	Consistent use of APA format

APPENDIX C.

Survey Instrument Items: Perceived Higher Education Administration Competencies and skills

Note: Students are given two sets of response options for each item stem. The first set of response options (Part I) asks about self-related knowledge of competencies, and the second set of response options (Part II) asks about importance given to each competency.

Part I: Based on your current understanding of higher education competencies, how would you rate your knowledge of the areas listed below? Please select the option that best reflects your current knowledge.

Response options for each item,

Not knowledgeable – somewhat knowledgeable – knowledgeable – very knowledgeable.

Part II: Based on your career aspirations when you complete your master's degree in higher education administration, how important are the following competencies to you? please select the option that best reflects your opinion.

Response options for each item,

Not important – somewhat important – important – very important

Item stems for part I and II:

1. The missions, purpose and goals of higher education (K1).
2. The historical foundations of American higher education (K2).
3. The roles that faculty play in the functioning of American colleges and universities (K3).
4. The roles that administrators and staff play in the functioning of American colleges and universities (K3).
5. The roles that students play in the functioning of American colleges and universities
6. (K3).
7. The ethical codes of conduct guiding higher education administration professional practice (K5).
8. How to network and cultivate professional relationships in the field of higher education administration (SA4).
9. How to conduct literature searches to identify scholarships that might be helpful in ameliorating an issue or question related to higher education practice (SA1).
10. How to write a literature review on a higher education topic (SA3).
11. How to do a presentation on a higher education topic (SA3).
12. The components of a well-designed and well-executed higher education research study (K6).
13. How to propose research questions related to an issue or problem in higher education (K6, SA1).
14. Common quantitative methodologies used in higher education research (K6).
15. Common qualitative methodologies used in higher education research (K6).
16. How higher education practitioners design and conduct research to better understand a problem of practice (K6, SA1).
17. The ethical issues related to the study of human subjects, especially college students (K6).
18. Leadership practices in higher education (K4).

19. Finance and budgeting in higher education (K1, K4).
20. Legal issues in higher education (K1, K4).
21. Diverse student populations in higher education (K1, K3).

4.1 FINDINGS, CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS.

The review of the literature revealed no convincing evidence that problem-based learning (PBL) improves knowledge base and clinical performance, at least not of the magnitude that would be expected given the resources required for a PBL curriculum. The results were considered in light of the educational theory that underlines PBL and its basic research. The authors conclude that the ties between educational theory and research (both basic and applied) are loose at best.

SUGGESTIONS

The suggestion of Maki (2001) and others (Bresciani, 2011; CAHEP, 2010), the authors tailored the competencies to ensure they were directly aligned with the program's mission / purpose statement. Similar to other professional fields, they equally emphasized acquisition and application (Delaney, 1997) and organised the competencies according to the knowledge and skills that successful higher education practitioners should demonstrate at the conclusion of their master's degree.

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