Competency-Based and Hybrid Instruction: Two Alternative Approaches to Time-Based Registered Apprenticeships

November 2020

_____

In recent years, interest in competency-based education (CBE) has risen dramatically at community colleges. In this form of learning, students engage in self-paced instruction followed by an assessment of their learning and skills rather than attending traditional time-based courses and receiving traditional grades upon completion. Seen as the future of community college education by some, and as a watered-down version by others, competency-based approaches appear to be here to stay. More recently, interest has grown in competency-based apprenticeship programs, which some believe more closely align learning and mastery of skills in the workplace.

Community colleges have always played a key role in workforce development in local communities and are now venturing into apprenticeship engagement and instruction like never before. This has been true of CBE programs, as well. Some colleges have been on the forefront of CBE instructional strategies for many years. But with the recent growth in apprenticeship, more colleges may want to try CBE approaches in an effort to refine existing programs.

The competency-based (CB) and hybrid (HY) approaches to Registered Apprenticeship are gaining popularity across the country. Both of these alternatives to the traditional, time-based approach to apprenticeship instruction have the potential to meet the needs of a broader set of employers and apprentices. In order for employers, apprenticeship sponsors, and workforce development professionals to design and implement successful CB and HY Registered Apprenticeship programs, it's important that they have a clear understanding of what CB and HY apprenticeships are, how they differ from time-based apprenticeships, and the nuances of how they're designed.

The purpose of this brief is to provide colleges, employers, apprenticeship sponsors, and workforce development professionals with a comprehensive understanding of CB and HY Registered Apprenticeship programs.

Trends in Registered Apprenticeship
Registered Apprenticeships have existed in the United States since 1937, and are overseen by the Office of Apprenticeship at the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL). Until 2008, completion of an apprenticeship program was fully dependent on completing 2,000 hours per year of on-the-

job learning (OJL), coupled with approximately 144 hours of related technical or classroom instruction, depending on the length of the apprenticeship.

In 2008, the DOL authorized the CB and HY approaches to Registered Apprenticeship instruction. The CB approach measures apprentices' progress based on their level of competency regardless of OJL time, while HY apprenticeships factor in both competency and OJL time. The DOL made this change in order to increase participation in apprenticeship programs nationally by appealing to a wider range of employers whose needs weren't met by the traditional, time-based apprenticeship model.

In recent years, the CB and HY approaches to Registered Apprenticeship have grown in popularity among both apprenticeship practitioners and employers. While CB and HY apprenticeship programs can sometimes be completed more quickly than time-based programs, that isn't the main benefit of using these approaches. Rather, the CB and HY approaches can enhance apprenticeship programs by providing clear benchmarks and clarity about employers' goals and expectations and a framework for employers to assess their apprentices' progress. CB and HY apprenticeships also benefit apprentices, who, upon completion, are armed with a clear picture of what they can actually do. This provides context to apprentices' professional experience and makes them more agile members of the labor force.

The Three Approaches to Registered Apprenticeship

Time-based: Time-based apprenticeship is the tried-and-true model that has worked for thousands of apprentices for decades. In a time-based apprenticeship program, apprentices are required to complete a minimum number of hours of OJL against requirements listed in an occupational standard that is defined by their employer. OJL requirements range from one to six years, depending on the occupation. In addition, apprentices must complete 144 hours of RTI for each 2,000 hours of OJL.

- Apprentices' progress through the OJL portion of their time-based apprenticeship is measured only by the number of hours of OJL they've completed in a set of work process categories.

Competency-based: In a CB apprenticeship program, apprentices are required to demonstrate that they have achieved a set of competencies that their employer has identified as being necessary in their chosen occupation. CB programs also require apprentices to complete RTI. The required hours of RTI are calculated based on requirements for parallel occupations delivered in time-based programs.

- Apprentices' progress through the OJL portion of their CB apprenticeship is measured solely on their attainment of the required competencies, verified by the employer.

Hybrid: In an HY apprenticeship program, apprentices are asked to achieve a set of competencies within a specified range of OJL hours. Employers define both the required competencies and the range of hours within which they believe apprentices should achieve those competencies. HY programs also require apprentices to complete 144 hours of RTI for each 2,000 hours of OJL.

- Apprentices' progress through the OJL portion of their HY apprenticeship is measured both on their level of skills gained and the number of hours they have spent in OJL to attain those skills.

Comparing the CB and HY Approaches
Both CB and HY apprenticeship programs require that the sponsor and/or employer define a set of required skills that apprentices must demonstrate in order to complete their program. While CB and HY programs are very similar in practice, there are a few key differences that sponsors should consider when determining which may be the right approach.

In a CB program, competency is king. That means that there is no reason for employers to track and monitor the amount of time an apprentice spends learning crucial skills, and measures of time should not impact apprentices' progress through or completion of their apprenticeship program. CB apprenticeships are arguably the most flexible of the three approaches, since they focus exclusively on apprentices' attainment of skills, without emphasis on where and when those skills were learned or how long it took for the apprentice to achieve them.

In an HY program, attention is paid both to apprentices' level of skill and the amount of time they've spent learning those skills. This allows employers an extra layer of oversight of their apprentices' progress and lets them consider whether an apprentices' skill development appears to be taking more or less time than they think is reasonable. This can provide useful context to employers as they assess their apprentices' progress, but it also requires an additional layer of documentation that employers need to manage and analyze.

Matching Employers with the Right RA Approach
An employer's or sponsor's goals and culture can influence which approach to Registered Apprenticeship will work best. No single approach is superior. Any program that is well designed and thoughtfully implemented should yield the desired results.

- **The employee feels constrained by the traditional time based approach and wants to quickly get the apprenticeship to mastery of skills and compentencies.**

The employer or sponsor is especially concerned with reducing the duration of the apprenticeship program. Either a CB or an HY program could be better than time-based programs if this is a priority. While it's not guaranteed that CB or HY programs will be shorter than their time-based counterparts, they do offer the possibility that apprentices will finish their program sooner, allowing for more apprentices to join the program more quickly. This can be particularly attractive if the employer is hoping to hire apprentices that already have some of the competencies required in the program; with the CB and HY approaches, apprentices who already have some required skills or RTI completed when they begin their program can easily be granted credit for those skills, reducing the amount of time spent in OJL.

- **The employer or sponsor wants to have maximum flexibility in the apprenticeship program.** CB programs provide the most flexibility in how OJL is conducted. Since CB programs only require documentation of apprentices' skill level against the competencies documented in the work process, employers can structure the OJL however is best suited to them. Ultimately, it is the employer's responsibility to ensure that apprentices have an opportunity to learn the required skills, regardless of when or how an apprentice learns them, or how long it takes.
- **The employer's culture is best suited to a skills-focused approach.** For employers who are accustomed to rewarding and advancing their employees on the basis of skill rather than time spent in their job, the CB approach is a better fit. Many employers recognize that more hours on the job doesn't always equate to more skills. Some employees learn more quickly than others, and the CB and HY approaches both allow for apprentices to learn and progress at their own pace.

In the HY approach, the employer or sponsor wants the apprentice to master skills and competencies quickly, but also wants to ensure the apprentice is getting some of the theory and related classroom instruction to support their development.

Building a CB or HY Apprenticeship
Creating an apprenticeship program is a nuanced process and is different for every sponsor. The process can vary depending on the selected occupation and approach and the level of urgency and energy that the employer is able to dedicate to this process.

This section focuses on developing CB and HY work processes by addressing the simplest case: an employer that chooses a single occupation that is already approved to be delivered in the desired approach.

For more information about how to build an apprenticeship program more generally, you can refer to this helpful Quick Start Guide from the DOL. In more complex situations where the desired occupation and/or approach isn't approved, employers and/or sponsors should work with their contact at the DOL or their state apprenticeship agency (SAA) to figure out the best way forward.

Overall Process
In general, developing an apprenticeship work process involves the following steps:
1. Identifying the occupation
2. Selecting the apprenticeship delivery approach
3. Finding and assessing existing work process samples for the occupation and approach, if available
4. Building your work process by either customizing a sample or developing one from scratch (if that is preferred by the employer or no suitable sample is available)

Employers and/or apprenticeship sponsors should also note that apprenticeship program standards are not set in stone. Employers that realize the work process is missing crucial elements or is otherwise misaligned with their needs can submit modification requests to their DOL or SAA contact for approval. These modifications are a natural part of the apprenticeship implementation process, so employers and/or sponsors need not worry about perfection in developing their program.

Building a CB or HY Work Process
Whether you're launching a CB or HY program, you'll need a robust competency list that will populate your work process. Competencies, in this context, can be synonymous with skills. Regardless of your chosen lexicon, this design process is where you'll develop arguably the most important content of your program's standards.

While simply customizing a work process sample may be more efficient, some employers may choose to develop their work process from scratch to ensure that it is fully representative of their specific needs.

Finding Work Process Outline Samples
Work process outlines can be developed from scratch or can draw from existing samples found with the support of a DOL or SAA contact or through various online sources. Reviewing program samples can be a useful exercise for employers that are new to Registered Apprenticeship and need a starting point.

The following online resources are a good place to begin your search for program samples:

1. **Urban Institute Competency-Based Occupational Frameworks**
The Urban Institute has worked with the DOL to develop a series of competency-based occupational frameworks that are nationally approved and vetted by industry experts in a variety of industries. All of the frameworks are for CB or HY programs.

2. **Dropbox Repository of Work Process Samples**
This collection of apprenticeship program samples, which can be accessed through Workforce GPS, is a valuable resource and collects thousands of program samples in all apprenticeship approaches. While not exhaustive of all apprentice able occupations, it includes samples for hundreds of occupations in various industries.

3. **Healthcare Career Advancement Program Library**
This library gathers apprenticeship work process samples covering a wide range of health care-related occupations, and for many occupations provides several samples that employers/sponsors can compare.

Common Challenges: Working in a Time-Based World
Many of the systems you'll encounter while launching your apprenticeship program are time-based by nature. Most secondary and postsecondary education systems run on semesters and seat time. Many workforce development and HR systems are similarly driven by performance metrics that are derived from years, months, or hours of training or experience. This means you'll have to be flexible and work with your internal and external partners to find the best ways to integrate your program within existing systems. You might even find creative ways to improve those systems as you go.

Roles of the Sponsor and Employer
The sponsor for any Registered Apprenticeship program is ultimately responsible for ensuring that the program is run in accordance with DOL apprenticeship standards and that all required documentation is in order. In some cases, the program sponsor may not be the employer, but a third party (such as an RTI provider, a workforce development agency, or a nonprofit). If this is the case, the sponsor must ensure that the employer is completing required competency assessments. The sponsor may choose to require that all employers participating in its program use a specific software or process for tracking apprentices' competency attainment.

Whether they are the program sponsor or not, employers are responsible for overseeing their apprentices' competency attainment and documenting apprentices' progress. If they are not the program sponsor, employers must share these assessments with the program sponsor to ensure program compliance with the DOL or SAA.

Competency Assessments
In order to track apprentices' progress throughout their apprenticeship program, employers and/or sponsors should define their process for conducting regular competency assessments and must maintain documentation of the results of each assessment.

Completion of CB or HY Apprenticeships
Completion of a CB apprenticeship program depends on an apprentice's successful attainment of all of the competencies listed in the work process, along with completion of all RTI requirements. In HY programs, apprentices must also have worked a sufficient number of hours

in each work process category, as defined in the work process outline. Note that an apprentice's completion of a program is always subject to the employer's final approval.

If ongoing competency assessments are done effectively, an apprentice's completion of the program should be straightforward. When apprentices achieve all of the skills required in their work process outline, but their employer does not feel that they are ready to complete their apprenticeship, that could indicate that the work process needs to be adjusted to account for additional desired skills. Further, if apprentices appear to be learning at an appropriate pace but their apprenticeships last much longer or shorter than the employer expected, this may be a sign that the work process should be trimmed down or expanded.

Completing a CB or HY program is a great milestone for workers. It demonstrates not only that they have experience in their chosen occupation, but that they also have demonstrable skills that they can take with them as they continue to grow their careers.

RESOURCES

- **JFF Blog: What to Know About Competency-Based Apprenticeships:** Competency-based apprenticeship programs are on the rise, and for good reason. In the right circumstances, this approach can offer needed flexibility for employers and program sponsors and provide a way to determine if apprentices have truly acquired the skills and competencies required for the job.

- **JFF Webinar: Understanding Competency-Based Apprenticeship Programs:** In 2018, JFF's Center for Apprenticeship & Work-Based Learning hosted this one-hour webinar exploring the growing influence that competency-based learning frameworks and program models are having on apprenticeship in the U.S. This webinar examines the increased use of competency-based apprenticeships, where apprentices master a specific skill and then move on to the next level, an approach that reduces the time needed for workers to achieve full productivity.

- **Competency-Based Occupational Frameworks for Registered Apprenticeships:** The Urban Institute has worked with the DOL to develop a series of CBOFs that are nationally approved and vetted by industry experts in a variety of industries. All of the CBOFs are for CB or HY occupations.

- **Example Apprenticeship Standards and Work Process Samples:** This collection of apprenticeship program samples, which can be accessed through Workforce GPS, is a valuable resource and collects thousands of program samples in all apprenticeship approaches. While not exhaustive of all apprentice able occupations, it includes samples for hundreds of occupations in various industries.

- **Healthcare Career Advancement Program Library:** This library gathers apprenticeship work process samples covering a wide range of health care-related occupations, and for many occupations provides several samples that employers/sponsors can compare.

Note: This brief contains content originally drafted by Kinsey Matney, June 2020.