Show and tell: Blending and expanding credit by exam and competency-based credit in sport management

Michael Hutchinson*, Richard L. Irwin, Timothy D. Ryan

The University of Memphis, United States

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Prior learning assessment has become a common strategy in higher education whereby institutions recognize and legitimize the meaningful learning that takes place outside of the formal educational setting. While institutional prior learning assessment methods vary, credit by exam is one example of a competency-based program that has grown in popularity due in part to its association with student success benefits. In advancing the conventional credit by exam concept, this article describes the Credit By Exam 2.0 program designed to explore alternative pathways in competency-based education. Different from a traditional College-Level Examination Program Test and credit by exam, the unconventional aspect of this program is its expansion beyond the 'all or nothing' approach to earning course credit by using a two-phase process that allows a student to test out of portions of course content that he/she can demonstrate as having already mastered. The novel features of this program and its implications will be discussed.

1. Prior Learning Assessment

Words such as "innovative," "novel," and "pioneering" are often elegant substitutes for one basic constant within organizations: the need for change. The same is true for higher education and the array of circumstances meriting considerations for change; from understanding the demographic make-up of today's undergraduate student to course availability in multiple formats (Anderson, 2016). In response to this changing landscape, prior learning assessment has become a common strategy in higher education whereby institutions "evaluate for academic credit the college-level knowledge and skills an individual has gained outside of the classroom" (Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, 2010, p. 6). In essence, prior learning assessment recognizes and legitimizes the meaningful learning that takes place in a variety of other settings including prior/current employment, advanced secondary education, civic activities, volunteer services, and even hobbies. While institutional prior learning assessment methods vary, more common methods include individualized student portfolio assessment (e.g., experiential learning credit), evaluation of corporate or military training (e.g., American Council on Education Guides), and standardized exams (e.g., credit by exam programs) (Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, 2010).

While critics of prior learning assessment emphasize their non-traditional educational characteristics, research indicates several student success benefits. For instance, research by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (2010, 2011) revealed that students with prior learning assessment demonstrated better academic outcomes than students without prior learning assessment as evidenced by higher graduation rates, increased persistence, and lower time to degree. Specifically, standardized exams in the form of credit by exam are central prior learning assessment methods within many higher learning institutions (Haynie, 2013). Such programs provide students the opportunity to demonstrate competency—and thus test out—of both lower- and upper-level degree

---

coursework. Research specific to credit by exam has also revealed a variety of student success benefits including higher GPA (Barry, 2013; Scammacca & Dodd, 2005), better course performance (Moulder, Abdulla, & Morgan, 2005; Scammacca & Dodd, 2005), higher graduation rates (The College Board, 2004), and lower educational costs (The College Board, 2004).

Typically, credit by exam methods, policies, and procedures slightly differ from institution to institution. For instance, at The University of Memphis—the setting for this article—credit by exam offerings include the College-Level Examination Program, Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Educational Support, Advanced Placement Program, International Baccalaureate Program, and Departmental/School Examinations. Currently, four of the five programs have guidelines with limited to no opportunity for deviation from the established protocol. Yet, the Departmental/School Examinations offering is one method that allows for more leniency in innovative approaches to the credit by exam process. The current procedure for a student interested in earning credit for a course is to begin by completing an exam. If the student earns a C or above (often 70% or higher) on the exam, the student earns credit for the course. Likewise, if the student earns below a C on the exam, the student does not earn credit for the course. Assuming the student earns a C or above, a grade of "Satisfactory (S)" appears on the student's transcript in conjunction with the course. Yet, what the current Departmental/School credit by exam model does not account for is a student's ability to demonstrate competency for select material or portions of a course. Enter Credit By Exam 2.0.

1.1. Credit by exam 2.0 program

Contrary to the all or nothing approach of existing credit by exam models, Credit By Exam 2.0 is a two-phase process that allows for a student to test out of portions of course content that he/she can demonstrate as having already mastered. In the initial phase of Credit By Exam 2.0, a student completes a pre-test. The pre-test is divided into distinct modules based on the content in the course. Rather than the student needing to earn a C or above on the entire pre-test, the student can test out of select modules by earning a C or above on the individual modules. In the second phase of the program, the student is then allowed to complete the modules of the course for which competency was not demonstrated on the pre-test in an online course format. Based on the student's performance on both the pre-test and subsequent online course, a "Satisfactory (S)" grade can be earned. Below is a description of its implementation.

Credit By Exam 2.0 was initiated as an 18-month pilot program designed to be applied within any university degree program offering credit by exam as a course completion alternative. To illustrate its inception and implementation, the undergraduate Bachelor of Science in Sport and Leisure Management degree at The University of Memphis was used as the setting. Specifically, five Sport and Leisure Management core courses were used to pilot this program: Promotions in Sport and Leisure (SLS 3650), Sport and Culture Global Perspectives (SLS 4135), Sport and Leisure Governance (SLS 4155), Legal Aspects of Sport and Leisure Management (SLS 4205), and Sport and Leisure Marketing (SLS 4500). Students recruited to participate in this program were juniors and seniors that had earned a C or above in Foundations of Sport and Leisure Management (sophomore level pre-requisite for the Sport and Leisure Management program's subsequent core courses). These students were emailed an explanation of the program and asked if they would be willing and able to participate.

One of the most unique aspects of this program was the tuition rate. In working with the Office of the Vice Provost, Academic Innovation and Support Services, we wanted to ensure students had an incentive to participate in the program. Consequently, we offered two incentives that would induce student participation. The first was a maximum course tuition figure of $1000. This alone was a great incentive in that a student would typically have paid between $1200 and $1500 for the ground or online offering of the course. The second, and more intriguing of the two incentives, was tying the tuition payment to a student's pre-test performance. We were able to allow a student to only pay for the pre-test modules for which they could not demonstrate competency. For example, if a student tested out of 50% of the pre-test modules, he/she would only be required to pay 50% of the tuition rate; in this case, $500. Of course, we needed to have a minimum tuition figure as well; so $300 was the minimum amount that any student would pay regardless of pre-test performance. While these were two great incentives, one limitation was an inability to offer financial aid. Since we operated the program through the Office of Continuing Education, we could not offer financial aid. Certainly, this was an unfortunate obstacle for select students interested in program participation.

1.2. Program implementation

The first phase of the program involved students preparing for and completing a course's pre-test. For students willing and able to participate in the program, all course material information was provided to them in preparing for pre-test completion. This included the course textbook, access to the online course shell which included recorded lectures and transcripts of the recorded lectures, and study guides that would have been available for both the ground or online course offerings. Regarding the pre-test, participating faculty members were provided the freedom to structure the pre-test in a manner that reflected the course content and its implications. Of the five courses in this program, four courses provided a pre-test that consisted of objective questions (multiple choice, true or false, fill-in-the-blank, matching) within each module, while one course delivered a written pre-test consisting of short answer and discussion questions. In this program, SLS 3650 (8 modules), SLS 4135 (10 modules), SLS 4205 (16 modules), and SLS 4500 (10 modules) used a more standard objective pre-test, while SLS 4155 (9 modules) applied a written pre-test. In order to demonstrate competency for an individual module of a pre-test, a student needed to answer 70% or more of the questions correctly in order to demonstrate competency—and thus test out—of the module. For example, if there were 10 questions in a given pre-test module, a student would need to answer 7 or more correctly to demonstrate competency. Each student completed the pre-test on campus under proctor of the faculty member, Office of Continuing Education staff, or, when appropriate, Disability Resources for Students staff.