

# A Self-Paced, Competency-Based Certificate in Small Business Administration

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## Project Background

There is growing interest in higher education in the value of competency-based learning as a means of aiding some students to complete college credentials in a more timely way as well as allowing more self-guided progress. When students can quickly move through assessment of competencies they already possess, or which they attain quickly, they can not only complete requirements at a faster pace than traditional learning, but may stay more motivated because they have more control over their learning and the pace of completion. Because this approach allows students to progress on their own schedule, such courses must be designed as self-paced to the extent allowable by financial aid and other institutional requirements.

## Synopsis

We proposed to make an entire certificate available in a competency-based, self-paced form. The five courses in our Small Business Management certificate (three business courses, and two institutional requirements) were divided into competencies and modules, and the learning activities for them developed in an online environment. Students in these courses were able to complete modules at their own pace within the timeframe of a semester. Beginning this fall, students were able to register for and start any competency course up until the mid point of the semester. So included in the project was a modified "rolling enrollment" strategy allowing students to begin courses outside of the typical semester start dates.

This competency-based approach allows students to receive credit for modules for which they already have competency by completing the module assessment at any time, and they can work through the learning activities for a given competency and take the assessment whenever they are ready. We proposed that this approach enables some students to progress more quickly through the certificate. Perhaps more importantly, this approach puts the responsibility for learning in the hands of students, and therefore, provides motivation and a sense of control over their progression through the program. Finally, the business courses in the certificate were developed using open resource textbooks which makes the courses more affordable.

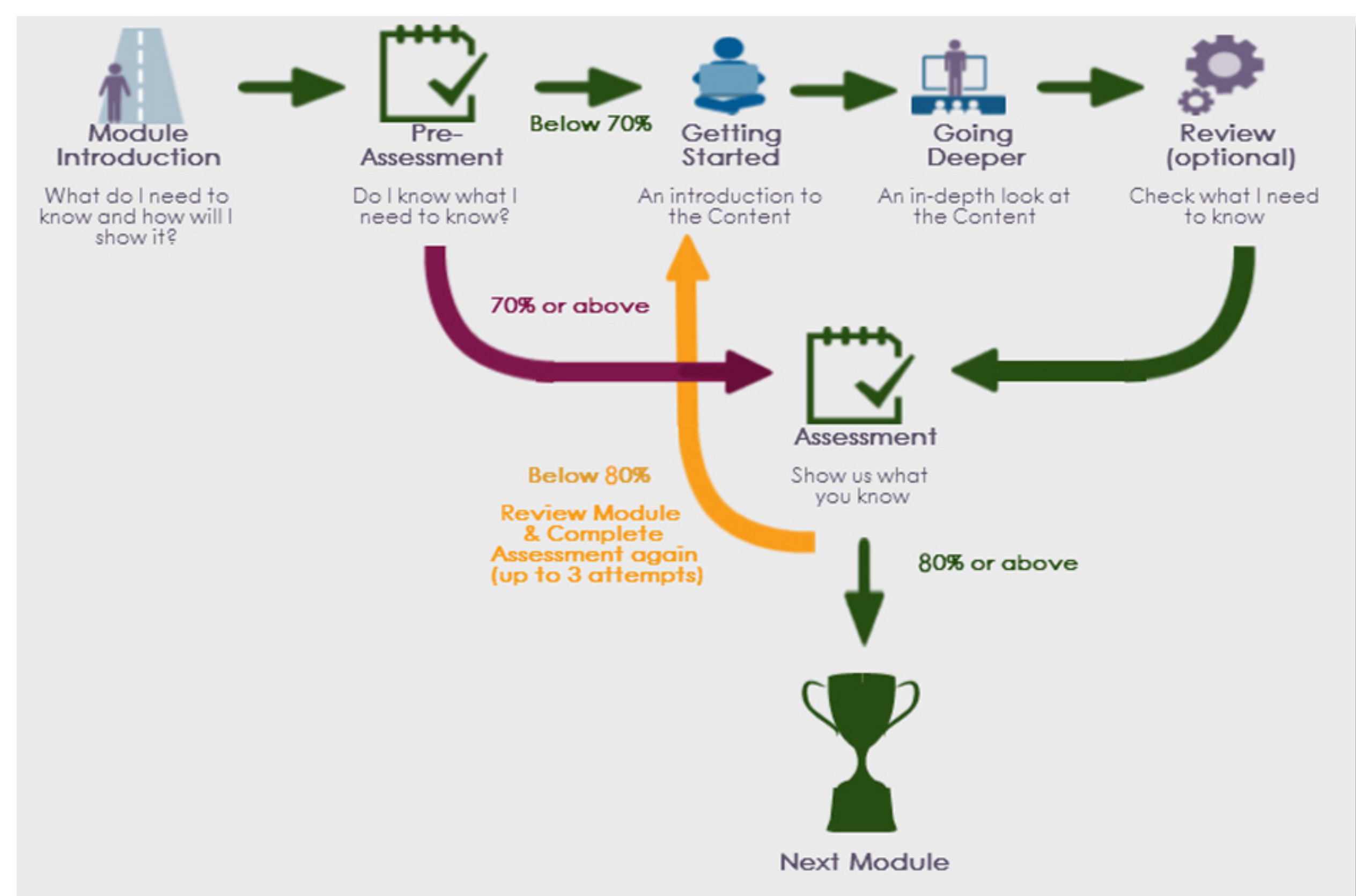
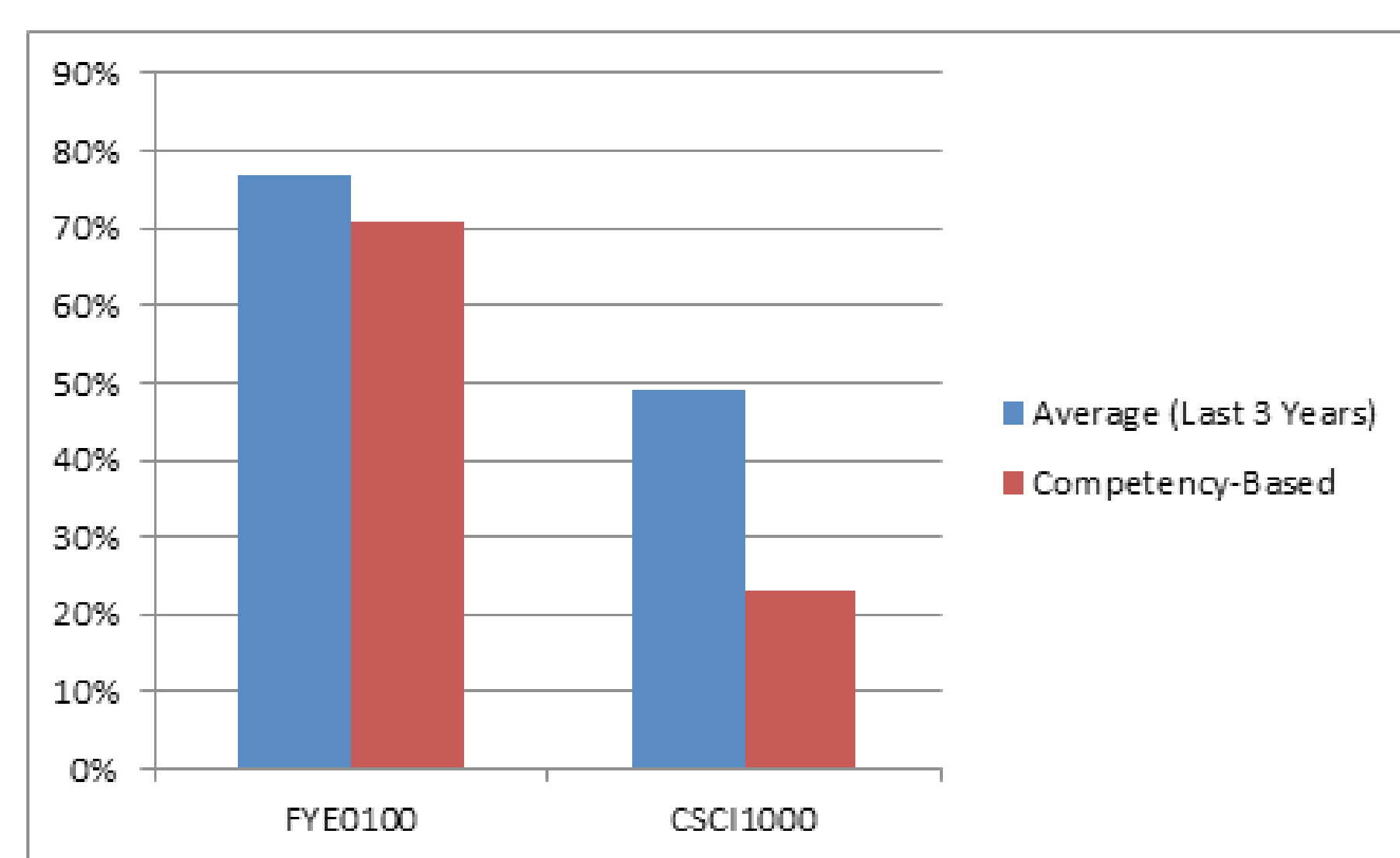
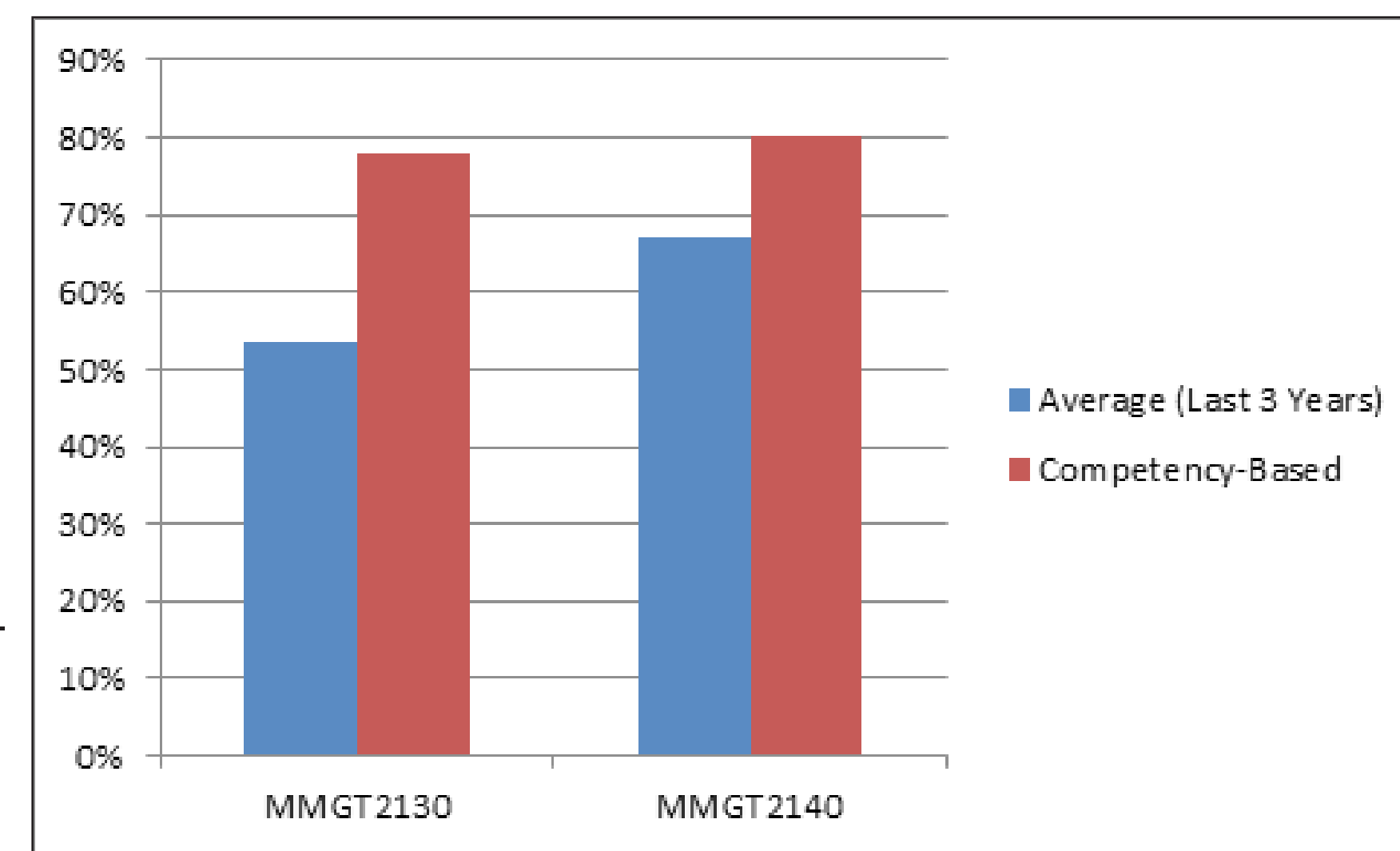
In each module of the course, students can determine through a pre-assessment if they have sufficient competency to take the assessment. If not, or if they simply choose to, they can then go through the learning experiences provided before taking the required assessment.

## Impact on College Completion

Competency-based courses are currently being touted as a means of helping some students complete college credentials in a more timely way as well as ensuring they stay motivated to work toward completion. While it is too soon to know if the redesigned certificate will have a long term impact on completion rates, we do see evidence that it might. Students in the summer sections of two business courses in the certificate had a higher completion rate than students in other online versions of the courses for the past three years. The other business course had never been taught online, so there is no comparison to make, while the other two college-required courses (First Year Experience and Computer Fundamentals) showed mixed results.

## Key Findings

- Completion rates for the two business courses in the certificate that had previously been offered online were higher than the regular, on-line courses over the past three years as seen in the chart to the right.
- Redesigning courses as competency-based courses requires a tremendous effort in both the reworking of traditional course outcomes into competencies and the subsequent development of the course. For most faculty, rethinking a course in terms of self-paced competencies is a tall order. Significant faculty training and assistance for course design is imperative, and by its nature, costly and time consuming. Presumably, after an instructor has been involved in designing one competency-based course, others will be easier. But for the first go-round, institutions considering this approach will need to make a substantial investment to design and deploy such courses.
- The learning curve for students is also substantial. They need to understand the nature of the courses before signing up for them, and they need significant education about how to self-manage themselves in competency-based courses once they begin them. Accomplishing this requires greater student support staff than necessary in "regular" online courses.
- Self-pacing did not result in students completing courses any faster. Most students took the entire semester, and indeed, some left many competencies until late in the semester which required them to rush through them. Therefore, students need milestones or some type of direction for the pace at which they need to complete courses rather than leaving it completely up to them. If there is too much self-direction allowed, some students will simply procrastinate and get behind too easily. So a balance between self-paced work and suggested rates of progress appears to be ideal.
- The two non-business courses did not fare as well as the business courses in retention. The First Year Experience course had a somewhat poorer result while Computer Fundamentals had a significantly worse outcome as seen in the chart below.



*“I like that there is no special time to turn in your work. You’re in control of what you do ... More online classes need to be like this.”*

— a student in one of the competency business courses

## Conclusion

Designing our Small Business Certificate as a group of competency-based courses was an informative endeavor. While student success rates in the business courses in the first semester are encouraging, it is impossible to know if the greater success was due to the competency-based design or just the general redesign of the courses. We provided extra attention and resources for students in these courses, so the outcome may be primarily due to improved student services. More work evaluating the courses will be necessary. The outcome for the two non-business courses were not as positive, but our primary design effort was concentrated in the business courses, and we believe this may have affected that outcome.

We will continue to offer the certificate in this format while revising the courses as needed along with our various processes including rolling enrollment. At the end of this year, we should be better able to conclude whether or not competency-based learning is appropriate for our students.

## Future Directions

- Self-pacing makes it difficult to build student-to-student engagement into competency-based courses. The literature on distance education makes it clear that such engagement is vital to student engagement with a course in general and contributes to student course completion. Self-pacing, by its nature, means students are mostly working on their own. Future course designs must find ways to engage students with other students as well as with instructors even though students may be at different places in a course.
- A "pure" competency-based approach would allow students to complete competencies at any time without regard for traditional semester timeframes or even courses, and it is within this kind of framework that perhaps the most promising benefit of this approach could be realized. We will need to continue exploring how to work within current guidelines to offer the most meaningful versions of competency-based courses.
- Competency-based learning seems best suited for skill-based disciplines where assessment of skills is discrete. We will continue to offer and monitor the success of these competency based courses, but we may explore other, more skills-based courses to offer in this manner in the future.

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