

U.S. REPRESENTATIVE
GLENN GROTHMAN
Wisconsin's 6th District

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Grothman on Debt, Learning and Re-evaluating Higher Education

(Washington, D.C.) – This week, at a House Education and Labor Committee hearing, Congressman Glenn Grothman (R-Glenbeulah) questioned experts about competency-based education (CBE).

A major concern in America is the amount of student loan debt students acquire when seeking a traditional four-year college degree. In Wisconsin, the average student graduates with nearly \$30,000 of debt. CBE alleviates this by allowing students to learn at their own pace and often obtain the same degree in a much shorter amount of time. For example, under a CBE program, instead of waiting until the end of a semester to take an exam and complete a course, as you would in a traditional four-year college, if a student demonstrates mastery of the subject, they could take the exam early and complete the course ahead of schedule. This would leave the student time in the school year to begin another class and theoretically complete several classes in the CBE program in the same time it takes a student learning under a traditional education model to finish one. So, they would have less time to accumulate mountains of student loan debt.

One witness Ms. Charla Long, also asserted at the hearing that students learning under a CBE program master the skills taught in the classroom better than other models. Because it is the responsibility of the university offering the CBE program, she claims that they must stand behind each student's grades in order to preserve an outstanding reputation, which creates an incentive for the university to make sure students are sufficiently grasping the material being taught.

Witnesses Included:

- Ms. Judith Marwick, Ed.D.
 - Provost at William Rainey Harper College
- Ms. Tomikia LeGrande, Ed.D.
 - Vice Provost for Strategic Enrollment Management at Virginia Commonwealth University
- Ms. Charla Long, J.D.

- Executive Director at the Competency-Based Education Network
- Mr. Sameer Gadkaree
 - Senior Program Officer at the Joyce Foundation

Excerpts of Grothman's questioning

Congressman Glenn Grothman: “Ms. Long, with regard to competency-based education, I hope one of the goals of this committee is to get out of here or pass something that’s going to reduce the cost of education, which is one of the reasons why we have this huge student loan debt. And, quite frankly, I think anybody part of the higher education system ought to go to bed at night wondering what they did wrong that we have so many young people so in debt. Can you talk a little bit about competency-based education? Both the effect it would have on student loan debt as well as the effectiveness in measuring whether somebody has actually learned something in a class.”

Ms. Charla Long: *“Yeah, two questions there. One, you ask also about cost, right? So, for a lot of CBE programs, they’ve been able to lower the cost of the degree, and often times that’s done by the amount of time it takes to get to degree. So, if you think about it, some use what we call a subscription model where you pay one price and you learn as much as you can. It’s like being at a buffet line, right, and you eat more than you really should have but it was ‘free’ or it was included, and you just keep eating. And learners in subscription models tend to take more and be able to go more quickly which is, in essence, reducing the cost of that degree. In addition to that, recognizing learning that has occurred from being agnostic as to the source of learning and recognizing learning that has occurred at a non-classroom-based setting but validating that learning as being college level has also yielded those kinds of cost savings.”*

Grothman: “Would you rather hire somebody who passed out of a competency-based education?”

Long: *“You’re asking a very biased question of a person like me. I would take a competency-based person because that institution is standing behind that learner and saying we know this person can demonstrate, and has demonstrated, their competencies. They actually have a transcript in which you can see what that looked like, what that demonstration looked like. If that’s some sort of a performance, a simulation, what have you. But you know what you’re getting versus they got a ‘C’, and I’m not sure what that ‘C’ means, I don’t know what’s taught in that class. So, I do think competency-based education gives employers, gives the learner, and gives the government, as the payer in most cases, more assurance of learning.”*

Grothman: “Right, a ‘C’ in a 19th century literature class, you don’t know what it means, correct? You don’t know if that has value or no value, other than just that some university charged somebody for it. But in competency-based education you know you have something of value, so it’s a superior way of judging whether you have value for your education, isn’t that true?”

Long: *“It’s a way of articulating what it is that you know you can do. So, your knowledge, your skills abilities, and your intellectual behaviors in a way that’s very transparent. Not just to the learner but to anyone else that would see that learner’s record.”*

Grothman: “And you feel, because different people learn at different rates, that you could wind up reducing the cost of tuition, reducing the size of student debt with more competency-based education?”

Long: *“Let me give you my feeling, it’s yes. I would love to see more data that backs that feeling up, right? So, what we see in early data is that it’s showing promise that it can reduce cost. I’d like to see more data to prove that out, but that would be my personal feelings, since you asked about my feelings. So yes, that’s how I would answer that question.”*

Grothman: “I think the University of Wisconsin, my alma mater, is aware that they can produce better students at less cost with competency-based education, but they’ve had some problems with federal regulations. Do you want to comment on the federal government standing in the way of better education and lower student debt?”

Long: *“So when you look at a direct assessment program, University of Wisconsin extension has a direct assessment model. When you look at that model that’s completely untethered from course and time. Any of those programs, and there’s really less than a dozen of them across the country, had to go through a two-step approval process not just through their regional accreditor but also through the Department of Education. And then everything they do must still tether back in some way to time. Those are constraints.”*

Grothman: “The rest of you, you’re all part of what I’ll call the education establishment. Do you see a lot of guilt out there on the part of administrators and academia as far as the huge amount of student loan debt and the degree to which they’ve crippled these young people? Is there a sufficient amount of guilt out there among these folks?”

Ms. Judith Marwick: *“I don’t know if I can comment about guilt, but I will say that we watch very closely our tuition, and at community colleges the tuition is quite low. We’ve tied it to the CPIU or to increases.”*

Grothman: “Are you guilty when say you run across a 35-year-old with \$40,000 in debt? Does that make you feel guilty?”

Marwick: “Yes.”

[Click here](#) to view Grothman’s remarks.



Link to the release: <https://grothman.house.gov/news/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=1123>