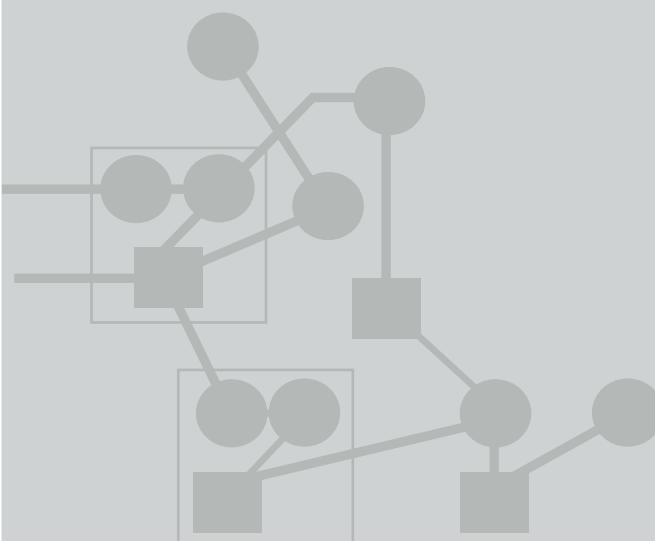# CBE
Quality Assurance
in
Competency-Based Education
2014

COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION AND QUALITY ASSURANCE

EMERGING THEMES DISCUSSED AT THE 2014 NATIONAL CONVENING

CAEL

EXCELSIOR COLLEGE®

FIELDING Graduate University

SOUTHERN New Hampshire University

June 2015

INTRODUCTION

As national attention on the need for improved educational attainment has grown, so has the demand for innovations in higher education. One such innovation is competency-based education (CBE), which, while not new in concept, has been reimagined with the advent of technology-based educational delivery and support services. CBE programs hold great promise for expanding access to higher education because they:

- allow students to progress on their own schedules and at their own pace;
- ensure that there are well-defined expectations for student mastery of learning; and
- recognize and build upon the students' existing knowledge and competencies gained from the workplace, the military, self-study, and other noncollege sources.

Yet, CBE frameworks are very different from the status quo in higher education. Many CBE programs establish vastly different roles for faculty, rely heavily on competency-based assessments of individual students, involve a different pricing structure than one based on semesters and credit hours completed, and approach curriculum and course design in new ways. These differences are significant in the eyes of more traditional faculty, administrators, accreditors, and regulators—all of whom have raised questions about whether students really learn in these programs and how the quality of these offerings might be assured.

Broader acceptance of CBE is needed in order for these programs to thrive. Students considering these pathways need to know that their degrees have value within the higher education community and in the eyes of employers. To respond to this need, the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL), Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU), Excelsior College, and Fielding Graduate University convened leaders in the field to discuss issues regarding quality assurance in CBE degree programs. Attendees included a variety of stakeholders, including representatives of colleges and universities offering CBE programs, the federal government, regional accrediting bodies, national higher education and policy organizations, and education technology providers, among others.

Following a brief overview of CBE in practice today, this report summarizes:

- the highlights of the panel presentations and discussions of the convening, which examined the promise and concerns of competency-based education;
- the views of various stakeholders in assuring quality; and
- the way forward.

AN OVERVIEW OF CBE DEGREE PROGRAMS TODAY
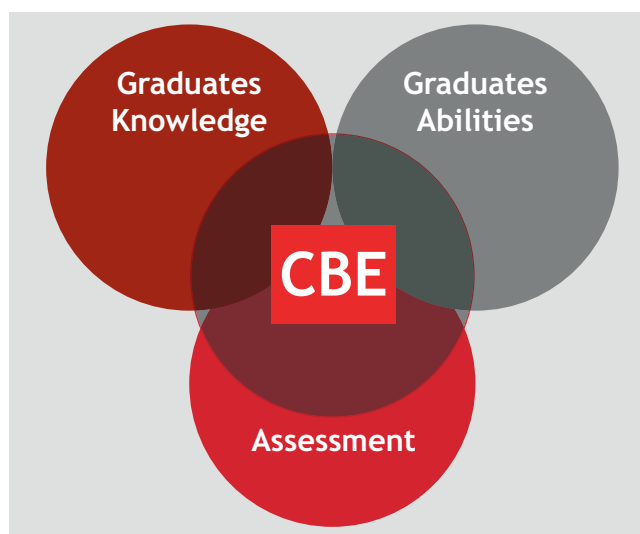
The term *competency-based education* refers to educational programs that clearly define and methodically assess the knowledge and abilities graduates must demonstrate. CBE degree programs in higher education have existed since the 1970s through institutions like DePaul University's School for New Learning, Fielding's doctoral program in clinical psychology, and Excelsior College's School of Nursing. With the expansion of online learning in the 1990s, higher education saw the emergence of new models for CBE that leveraged technology-based resources and services in order to provide improved flexibility in the delivery of learning options and afford students the opportunity to progress at their own pace. In recent years, with

the greater sophistication of online platforms, the explosion of online learning resources, and the increased pressure on higher education to better articulate what its graduates know and can do, hundreds of postsecondary institutions have started to offer—or are in the process of developing—CBE programs.

Although CBE does offer a common foundational approach, there is no single model for today's programs. Some offer fully online programs in which students progress independently through learning modules and assessments, while other models blend traditional face-to-face courses with online competency-based modules. There are also very different approaches to competency-based assessment, with options including performance, portfolio, or project-based assessments, behavioral assessments, and, where appropriate, multiple-choice exams. Some CBE programs have established a way to translate and crosswalk between competencies and credit-based courses, while others have been designed to depart significantly from credit-based degree plans.

CBE is now a growing field with new offerings emerging on a regular basis. Thanks to support from major funders like Lumina Foundation and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, there are several initiatives in place to fuel this growth, such as:

- **CBE Network, or C-BEN:** Composed of a select group of leading CBE institutions, C-BEN members are working together to explore best practices in program design; investigate ways to communicate with the rest of the world about CBE; and evaluate challenging issues like financial aid, program design, and business processes and systems. C-BEN is essentially the field's learning lab. The work they are doing is designed to be shared with all of higher education so that other institutions considering CBE can learn from their findings.

- **CAEL's CBE Jumpstart:** CAEL is working with 20 institutions and state systems over a three-year period to train faculty and staff on the basics of CBE and to help them as they begin the planning, design, and development of their individual institutional approaches.

- **Next Generation Learning Challenges/ Breakthrough Models Incubator:** The early cohort of this program, which seeks to accelerate the development and implementation of breakthrough models generally in higher education, included Northern Arizona's Personalized Learning Program, Southern New Hampshire University's College for America, and the Texas Affordable Bachelor's Degree. A second cohort was launched in 2014, offering nine institutions technical assistance and financial support to build their new CBE programs. An additional 10 institutions were selected in early 2015.

- **Community Colleges in Partnership with Western Governors University (WGU):** One of the early pioneers of CBE programming, WGU is now providing assistance to 11 community colleges as they develop competency-based degree and certificate programs.

THE PROMISE OF CBE— AND THE CONCERNS

There are a number of reasons why advocates of CBE believe it is a promising model for the current postsecondary landscape. Panelists at the convening discussed several important factors:

- **CBE programs communicate explicit expectations to students.** One of the defining elements of CBE design is the articulation of a clear set of competencies students must demonstrate to receive credit.

- **CBE is a good fit for nontraditional students and adult populations.** Many CBE programs are a natural fit for populations of learners that may not be well served through traditional models of postsecondary education. These populations may include full-time workers and returning adult students with a deep knowledge base from previous college studies as well as from their life and work experiences.

- **Coaching and student supports are critical parts of CBE programs.** CBE practices include mechanisms to help students stay on track as they progress through the competencies.

- **CBE programs depend on evidence that the student can apply knowledge and skills across settings.** Traditionally delivered degree programs often focus on specific content and application in limited settings. Offerings that emphasize competencies require students to demonstrate agility in using skills and knowledge meaningfully, and in real-world settings.

- **CBE focuses on what the students know and can do, not on how much time the students spend in learning activities.** Traditional degree programs organize learning experiences based on time spent in learning activities; whereas, CBE measures students' progress toward a degree based on demonstrations of what they know and can actually do.

- **CBE programs are student-centered.** CBE is designed to meet students where they are. Students can learn what they need to learn at their own pace and do not need to sit through instruction in topics they have already mastered. CBE allows students to build on what they already know and to become more active participants in their learning.

Despite these positive aspects of CBE, there is, nevertheless, suspicion about a model that fundamentally disrupts higher education in several key ways. The panelists at the convening outlined a few specific concerns that have been expressed about the CBE approach. One of the main anxieties was that CBE programs might be less rigorous than more traditionally delivered programs, based, in part, on the following areas of misunderstanding:

- **Misunderstanding #1: CBE is about providing a "faster and cheaper" alternative to traditional degree programs.** Although CBE methodologies can often be leveraged to expedite credential completion for students who have already mastered significant competencies, not every CBE student experiences this type of degree acceleration. In fact, the field has recognized that in some cases, completing a degree may take longer—and be more rigorous—since students cannot progress without satisfactorily demonstrating the required competencies. The CBE approach, by raising the bar on ensuring quality in the college degree, does not necessarily result in all students achieving degrees more quickly. In addition, on the issue of lower tuition rates for CBE students, panelists noted that most CBE programs are still in their infancy and, thus, unknowns remain about sustainability at the current fiscal ratios. The costs to update and improve the curriculum and technology on a regular basis may not, ultimately, be feasible with very low tuition prices. There is still much to learn about the various business models and the financial viability of these approaches.

- **Misunderstanding #2: CBE relies almost entirely on multiple-choice testing to prove competency.** Panelists expressed that, in their experience, many stakeholders are hesitant about engaging in the CBE model due to their impression that these programs rely heavily—or exclusively—on standardized testing methods to measure competencies. They hear the word "assessment" and think, "multiple-choice test." CBE stakeholders agree that using standardized testing alone is no longer sufficient for assessing the complex competencies that are needed in our current economy. In order for a CBE program to ensure that its graduates are truly competent in these high-level skill areas, a variety of assessment methods need to be used, many of which could likely benefit from new advancements in technology. Such rigorous evaluation methods in use today include authentic assessments that require students to apply their knowledge and skills in various contexts, such as workplace assignments, skill demonstrations, portfolios, work samples, and so on.

In addition to these general misconceptions about CBE programs, there are other worries about the

model. Panelists discussed the following issues as some of the major concerns in the field:

- **Different use of faculty.** In CBE programs, faculty are less likely to have the traditional instructional role; although, they are often involved in developing the curriculum, and they may serve as learning facilitators who work one-on-one with students, as needed, in their areas of expertise. This shift in occupational duties marks a major variation in how the faculty's role is defined at an institution and in their relationship with learners, leading some critics to wonder how students can be learning if the faculty are not teaching in the more traditional sense. Besides these changes in responsibilities, faculty may also feel that they are not prepared to serve as coach or facilitator, or they may feel as though their expertise and content knowledge is not being fully utilized.

- **Disaggregation of teaching and learning from the role of research by faculty.** An additional concern is that with the changing role of faculty in innovations like CBE, along with the pricing models that go with them, institutions may not be able to support the other role of faculty in

higher education: research. Faculty have traditionally played an important role not merely in knowledge transfer but also in knowledge creation. Critics argue that new models like CBE, with its more transactional role for faculty and lower price point, will not support the knowledge creation role of faculty, a cornerstone of what we have come to see as a high-quality higher education system. There is concern that this transformation may undermine the traditional power of the faculty within an institution.

- **Difficulty in mastering competencies in a short time period.** Many stakeholders have expressed concern that students may not be able to learn college level competencies in short, discrete online modules. Some learning requires time, repetition, and incremental progress. In other words, many believe that seat-time may be necessary for certain fields, subjects, or competencies.

- **Departure from the credit hour.** Several CBE programs are avoiding use of the credit hour as it is not a real measure of student learning. This transition makes it difficult for the institutions to comply with Title IV regulations regarding financial aid. Federal officials are

being asked to change the rules to accommodate these new programs; a request that is difficult to implement because, without having some other way to measure a student's progress or success and without guidelines for judging the quality of CBE programs, there may not be enough safeguards against fraud and abuse.

- **Question of appropriateness of CBE for every student.** Not all students will thrive in the CBE model, depending on their learning style and other factors. It is likely, for example, that successful CBE students are more highly self-directed and independent learners. Many CBE programs recognize this reality and have taken steps to address it: some counsel the students before enrollment about the demands of the program, some require students to try out the model through a free online trial course, and some use sophisticated data analytics to determine when students need additional guidance and support. A related concern is that CBE may not be appropriate for students needing remedial assistance in writing or math. Some CBE programs are exploring ways to link students to needed assistance, both in virtual and face-to-face environments.

These challenges are complex and not easily dismissed. As CBE continues to grow as a field, practitioners will need to continue to wrestle with them and work towards solutions.

STAKEHOLDERS IN CBE QUALITY ASSURANCE

In order for CBE to realize its full potential within higher education, there are several stakeholder groups that have a particularly vested interest in ensuring that these programs have been rigorously identified as high quality and as legitimate postsecondary degree programs: students, faculty, employers, the U.S. Department of Education, and regional accreditors.

Students

Since CBE programs are designed to be student-centered, students' needs and concerns will remain central to the development of the field. It is important that students are fully convinced of not only the quality of the learning opportunities offered through CBE programming but also the legitimacy of the degree they are seeking. They need to know that the degree will be respected by the higher education community and by their future employers in business and industry.

Faculty

Given that the traditional role of faculty stands to change in significant ways within CBE models, it is critical to ensure that faculty engagement and participation remains a fundamental aspect at all levels of development and implementation of CBE programming. The input of faculty, as experts in their disciplines, is critical when considering a CBE model for any program. When launching CBE programs, it is also important to offer development opportunities to faculty members around CBE-specific technology and curricular matters so that they are equipped to transition into their new roles.

Employers

One of the primary benefits of the CBE model is that it is designed to assure, rather than assume, that students have mastered a certain set of competencies and are able to demonstrate those competencies in real-world settings. This aspect of CBE models provides clarity and assurance to employers that graduates of these programs are competent in the areas specified by the degree program. It is important, however, that the competency areas are aligned with those most needed by employers. Although important, this input from employers must be balanced with the expertise of faculty and curriculum developers, as some critics have expressed concern about giving employers too much authority over curricula.

Department of Education

The U.S. Department of Education (DOE) has a significant role to play in furthering the CBE movement, particularly with regard to policies like Title IV of the Higher Education Act (HEA) regarding a program's eligibility for federal financial aid programs (i.e., Federal Pell Grant, Federal Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grant, Federal Perkins Loan, and Federal Subsidized and Unsubsidized Direct Loans). Title IV includes several regulations that tie provisions to time-based or credit-based measures. Because CBE programs are self-paced and focused on outcomes rather than seat-time, the U.S. Department of Education is challenged with identifying alternative ways for CBE programs to qualify for federal financial aid while also ensuring program quality.

As an effort to begin accommodating innovations not based on the credit hour, the Department passed regulation §668.10 of the HEC, which stipulates that "direct assessment" programs can be eligible for federal financial aid. *Direct assessment* is defined as "an instructional program that, in lieu of credit hours or clock hours as a measure of student learning, utilizes direct assessment of student learning, or recognizes the direct assessment of student learning by others." This regulation, however, still has some limitations for CBE programs in that it requires programs to offer substantial interaction with faculty and to reasonably equate their assessments back to a credit-based definition. Since 2013, several institutions have been granted the direct assessment designation. In addition, several dozen institutions are now taking part in the Department of Education's Experimental Sites Initiative through which they will experiment with small adjustments in the regulations to allow for financial aid in a CBE model.

At the convening, the department's representatives noted that, through recent programming, such as their First in the World (FITW) grants and the aforementioned Experimental Sites Initiative, the federal government is actively exploring how to support innovations in postsecondary education, even those that might require regulatory or legislative changes. To safeguard against fraud and abuse, policies do need to be in place that define quality in higher education. However, the department recognizes that the current rules and regulations were developed in a different era and need to be revisited in order to assess their relevance for today's students and today's institutions. As the federal government considers these needed changes to support CBE and other innovations, the department noted that its representatives are engaging with accreditors and other stakeholders to ensure that any changes fully address the needs of our contemporary context.

Accrediting Bodies

Regional accrediting bodies have the most direct impact on assuring quality in higher education, including within CBE models. The six regional accreditors in the United States are independent, nonprofit entities which oversee a peer review process to ensure that postsecondary institutions meet a determined set of quality standards. As with federal regulators, regional accreditors have based many of their quality standards on a credit-hour-based assumption. Therefore, as more institutions develop CBE programs, the accreditors recognize that their existing standards do not adequately define quality in a non-seat-time, non-credit-hour context.

Adding to the challenge is the fact that regional accreditors have always reviewed and approved institutions as a whole—not individual programs within a given institution. With the federal government's direct assessment program, however, the regional accreditors are being asked to approve the individual CBE program before it is sent on to the department for consideration.

The accreditors are now actively engaged with questions about how to evaluate the academic integrity of the programs, the rigor of the assessments, and the role of faculty. Since accreditors are independent, member-based entities, they each have unique policies and individual methods of assessing programs at their member institutions on a case-by-case basis. Some accreditors have taken steps to outline guidance for how CBE programs should be designed so that they align with existing quality standards. In addition, the regional accreditors report that they plan to work together on developing strategies and policies for CBE in the context of regional accreditation.

QUALITY STANDARDS AND THE WAY FORWARD

CBE is positioned to transform a number of fundamental aspects of higher education. The current efforts to promote and support the practice of CBE—such as the initatives to build new programs like the Breakthrough Models Incubator or CBE Jumpstart, the community of practice and collaboration that is the C-BEN initiative, and the efforts by and with the U.S. Department of Education and regional accreditors to make sure that financial aid policies and peer reviews recognize CBE as a legitimate and accepted approach for achieving postsecondary learning and credentials—are a good start. However, even with the progression of these efforts, there is still a long way to go in a number of areas in order to fully legitimize CBE as a workable innovation within the higher education arena; these issues will require a dedicated effort among practitioners from all stakeholder groups.

The convening's attendees identified three important activities to support CBE as the field matures:

- **Data Tracking and Making the Case for CBE**
  Building support for CBE will require providing data to prove the effectiveness of the CBE approach to postsecondary degrees. Therefore, conversations around feasible and useful data collection will be critical in determining the best methodologies for existing and new CBE programs to employ as they seek to document and showcase the effectiveness of their programs.

  Issues around academic integrity of the model are the primary topics that will require data as evidence as the field evolves. Important research questions include:

  - Are students learning through these programs? Is the learning at the depth and breadth that is expected of college graduates?
  - Are the assessments valid and reliable?
  - Are employers satisfied with the performance of employees after they graduate?

- **Communication and Sharing of Best Practice**
  Many participants at the convening expressed that developing a community of practice among professionals in the field is a key element in advancing CBE. It is important that CBE leaders have a forum to identify and communicate best practices as well as those practices that are not successful.

  Program design, assessments, and educational activities are all areas in which new programs could leverage a framework of best practices already identified by more established programs and leaders in the field. Participants noted that in the past, materials have been treated as private property by individual programs. They expressed, however, that it would be useful for the field as a whole to promote transparency by sharing such materials and collectively identifying the most effective practices and tools to implement.

  C-BEN is currently working to identify effective practices in order to share them with the growing community, and many other organizations have published considerable information about existing models. All of these efforts are a good start for what the field requires.

- **Maintaining centrality of faculty**
  CBE programs rely heavily on faculty to support the students and facilitate the learning, but most CBE models have transformed the role of the faculty as compared to traditional course-based instruction. Faculty need to better understand their role in CBE and what the benefits are to the learner in this approach. The faculty's importance to CBE cannot be understated. Without their support, CBE will not succeed. Faculty need to be involved in all institutional planning for and development of CBE initiatives. They need to be the co-creators of CBE programs so that they understand its pedagogy, its rigor, and its academic integrity. Faculty input is particularly critical in assuring that competency statements are clearly and accurately articulated. As subject matter experts, faculty must remain central to this process.

CONCLUSION

The CBE movement is uniquely positioned to build a new student-centered approach to postsecondary education that ensures its graduates are fully able to demonstrate the competencies needed in today's workforce. Leaders in the field are enthusiastic about new developments but also recognize that further innovation must be grounded in a common framework of quality standards that ensures all stakeholders are being heard and that students are able to access all the benefits the approach offers. Through continued collaborative efforts to establish standards of quality, CBE has the potential to persist in transforming the postsecondary landscape.

a new student-centered approach

continued collaboration and refinement

transformation of the postsecondary landscape

PANELISTS AND SPEAKERS

Marie Cini, Provost and Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs, University of Maryland University College

Kris Clerkin, Executive Director, College for America, SNHU

Laurie Dodge, Vice Provost and Vice Chancellor of Institutional Assessment & Planning, Brandman University

John Ebersole, President, Excelsior College

Carol Geary Schneider, President, Association of American Colleges and Universities

Barbara Gellman-Danley, President, Higher Learning Commission

Becky Klein-Collins, Associate Vice President for Research and Policy Development, CAEL

Amy Laitinen, Deputy Director for Higher Education, New America Foundation

Katrina Rogers, President, Fielding Graduate University

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Jamienne Studley, Deputy Under Secretary of Education, U.S. Department of Education

Pamela Tate, President and CEO, CAEL

Belle Wheelan, President, Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges

INSTITUTIONS IN ATTENDANCE

Postsecondary Institutions

Antioch University
Azusa Pacific University College
Brandman University
Broward College
Capella University
Charter Oak State College
City University of Seattle
DePaul University
Empire State College
Excelsior College
Fielding Graduate University
Golden Gate University
Granite State College
LeTourneau University
Lindsey Wilson College
Lipscomb University
Marylhurst University
Metropolitan State University
The New School
Pace University
Paul Smith's College
Saint Joseph's College of Maine
Seton Hill University
Sinclair Community College
Strayer University
Southern New Hampshire University
Spelman College
SUNY Empire State College
Thomas Edison State College
University of Maryland University College
University of New England
University of Wisconsin, Madison
Valdosta State University
Wilmington University

Regional Accrediting Bodies

Higher Learning Commission
Middle States Commission on Higher Education
Southern Association of Colleges and Schools
COC (SACSCOC)
WASC Senior College and University
Commission

Federal and State Governmental Agencies

Missouri Department of Higher Education
U.S. Department of Education

Associations, Intermediaries, and Policy Organizations

American Council on Education
Association of American Colleges and Universities
Cabrera Research Lab
Carnegie Foundation
Center for American Progress
CLASP
Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL)
HCM Strategists
National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education
New America Foundation

Higher Education Commissions and Consortia

Consortium of Universities of the DC Metro Area
Kentucky Community and Technical College System
Midwestern Higher Education Compact
New England Board of Higher Education
Tennessee Higher Education Commission

Technology and Other Corporate Partners/Vendors

Blackboard
Capital Education
The College Board
Cooley LLP
Educate Online
eLumen
Ellucian
Flat World Knowledge
Inside Higher Ed
Pearson
TaTa Interactive Systems
Parchment
Pippins and Associates
Saylor Academy
StraighterLine

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ers to increase access to education and economic
security. We provide adults with career guidance
and help them earn college credit for what they
already know. We equip colleges and universities
to attract, retain, and graduate more adult stu-
dents. We provide employers with smart strate-
gies for employee development. We build work-
force organizations' capacity to connect worker
skills to employer demands.

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