

Prerequisites for Launching Competency-Based and Other Innovative Program Models

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Successfully launching and maintaining an innovative program that defies some of the key elements of the traditional model requires student centricity, data-

driven decision making, leadership support, flexibility and faculty involvement—among other things. We are at an interesting point in higher education, with increasing and widespread concerns related to a myriad of challenges and issues; as well as a host of innovations to address these problems. Colleges and universities in every imaginable form appear to be committed to intentional strategies clearly directed at making completion of credentials more assessable and affordable. There is growing acknowledgement that the innovative approaches to higher education demonstrate that we are in the midst of a major transformation in higher education that will result in changes to the way it is experienced by students.

Innovations such as Competency Based Education (CBE) are driving higher education institutions to rethink how we might shape the future. However, many questions linger in relation to the necessary requisites to support innovation in higher education. In addition to the core tenets of successful organizational change—motivating for a change, creating a vision, developing support, managing transition, and sustaining momentum—our team has identified five necessary elements that could be attributed to the successful launch and continued development of innovations including CBE.

Leadership Commitment

Resources such as the Quality Framework for Competency-Based Education Programs, developed by members of the Competency-Based Education Network, begin with a foundation of institutional commitment to and capacity for innovation. The institution must first strategically plan and build a foundational infrastructure to support innovations such as CBE. These types of innovative approaches must be mission-driven and include policy, procedure and practice that clearly align and support the efforts. The leadership team must also make appropriate financial allocations and long-term investments, accepting in advance that returns on these innovative practices typically take time, and are often necessary to achieve compliance with accreditors and regulatory bodies. Leadership also understands that quality innovation requires adequate and appropriate support structures, which require intentional focus and commitment. Much of this solid foundation then leads to a change in the environment and culture of a campus.

Shift in Culture

People in general are often resistant to change. Those who are willing to seek out innovation are typically those who are dissatisfied with the status-quo, and are quick to learn that a shift in culture is often required to make positive change. Identifying and creating new and different ways of serving students, particularly those previously underserved, requires an understanding that innovations such as CBE are critical to the ongoing success and growth of higher education. A shift in culture is required for successful innovations, and is critical to long-term success and implementation of these types of innovative educational programs. Higher education innovators are quick to acknowledge that a clear understanding of why they are doing things they have never done before is a critical component to creation and implementation of innovative educational programs like CBE. At the core of this shift in culture, are the faculty.

Faculty Driven Development and Facilitation

While institutional and departmental commitment and advocacy for CBE programs is important; faculty-driven development, implementation, and facilitation are critical to the long-term success and growth of innovative academic programs. Research, as well as demonstrated best practice, has consistently shown that innovation in higher education rarely, if ever, works from mandated, top-down implementation. Development of a quality CBE program requires that faculty first understand why there is a need to build an innovative academic program, and then fully commit to that purpose. Higher education institutions are also charged with production and dissemination of transparent student learning outcomes, and key performance indicators such as time to degree, student debt, and career and advancement opportunities. In order to achieve what are often lofty goals with new and innovative approaches such as CBE, faculty need to be strategically involved from the onset of a program, and deeply connected to all stakeholders including students, community members, employers, administration, and policy makers. Programs that are not faculty-driven and facilitated often fall short, proving to be short-term, and are often scrutinized for lack of rigor or long-term validity.

Longitudinal Focus

When it comes to a longitudinal focus concerning a CBE program, we must measure what is valued—not just value what we happen to measure. For the field of competency-based education to continue to grow, we need to collect and disseminate longitudinal data supporting the value propositions. Additionally,

programs are challenged to contribute to the ongoing development of common language and definitions around CBE key performance indicators. These tasks are challenging since there is no one-size-fits-all model for all CBE, or other new and innovative models. Institutions often build programs to align with a specific mission or specialized focus, without intentional strategy for longitudinal data collection and reporting. The bar has been raised for higher education programs to not only collect data, but also to demonstrate effectiveness and ongoing continuous improvement. Creating a longitudinal data plan for collection and dissemination of key performance metrics from the onset of innovative program developments, such as CBE, enable both data-informed and insight-driven decision making that aligns with best practices shown to support student success.

Student-Centricity

A final observation from our team points to a central philosophical tenet: Innovations such as CBE programs must be student-centric. From the moment of inception, it is critical to involve partners from across the entire campus in the development and implementation of innovative programs, including marketing, advising, admissions, registrar, financial aid, learning management systems, IT department, faculty and staff professional development and training—along with all student learning resource areas, such as tutoring, libraries, and accommodations office. Often traditional processes, policies, procedures and practices are not aligned to new programs such as CBE programs. It is critical that a student-centric approach guides development and implementation with a comprehensive understanding and appreciation of the strengths and needs of students, and that those needs are at the core of all decisions, processes and systems.

Conclusion

Looking to the future, we are committed to continuous improvement and have high hopes for the ongoing success of innovations in higher education. We are committed to breaking down barriers and contributing to the ongoing efforts toward addressing the challenges and issues higher educators face today. By recognizing that the potential for positive transformation in higher education requires a student-centric focus, a longitudinal approach to using data for insights and decision making, full involvement by faculty in both development and implementation, ongoing commitment and support from leadership, and the

willingness to shift the culture, our team is well positioned to continue innovating.

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Texas A&M University-Commerce was the first public university in the state of Texas to launch a CBE program. A&M-Commerce currently offers a [BAAS in Organizational Leadership](#) and is scheduled to launch the BS in Criminal Justice soon.

The [Institute for Competency Based Education](#) (ICBE) is located at A&M-Commerce and assists institutions and state agencies with the ongoing development of competency-based programs. The institute also works with policymakers and higher education institutions to determine the effectiveness of competency-based programs by conducting research and publishing best practices.

The [Competency Based Education Network](#) (CBEN) is a national consortium for designing, developing and scaling new models for student learning and is considered the national authority on CBE.

[Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board](#) (THECB) serves as a state governing body for institutions of higher education.

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