



5 Critical Elements of Competency-Based Education Programs

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The 5 Critical Elements of *Competency-Based Education Programs*

Companies seeking the best way to close employee skills gaps are likely considering competency-based education (or CBE) programs. But because there's currently no one definition of CBE or one outline of what a CBE program includes, comparing options can be particularly confusing.

In 2015, [a report from the policy and research nonprofit Public Agenda](#) identified 10 design elements shared by thriving CBE programs, even if they are put into practice in different ways. Understanding these common aspects and how they distinguish different CBE programs can help employers as they consider learning and development solutions for their employees.

Previously, we looked at the broader question, "[What is Competency-Based Education?](#)" In this article, we will take a deeper look at the most important aspects of CBE. We will focus particularly on five of Public Agenda's 10 design elements:

1. Measurable and meaningful assessments
2. Learner centered
3. New or adjusted financial models
4. Flexible staffing roles and structures
5. Proficient and prepared graduates

1. Meaningful, measurable assessments

Rather than measuring student learning through more abstract methods like exams, a CBE program assesses learning through authentic assessments. For example, College for America's project-based direct assessment model may require students to produce a strategic marketing plan to demonstrate mastery of individual skills taught in the business degree program.

Such project-based assessments are often based on real-world examples. Students get to practice concrete skills in the way they will actually use them in the workforce. Additionally, they end up with a completed project to demonstrate these skills to their employer or prospective employer.

Meaningful and measurable assessments also help develop competencies that cut across disciplines. This means students who study, for example, art history through CBE will learn the content itself, plus skills such as applied research, giving presentations, and critical thinking that is useful in other domains.

These foundational skills are a major reason a CBE program is more effective at imparting work skills to employees. It emphasizes translating what students learn into common workplace scenarios and assignments.

2. Learner-centered pacing and flexibility

The white paper **Cracking the Credit Hour** by Amy Laitinen, director for higher education at New America Foundation, takes a look at the origins and limitations of that more traditional metric. While the credit hour remains the standard measurement of how much a student should have learned, Laitinen points out that it does a rather poor job of actually measuring knowledge. "Time and learning are not the same," she writes. "Two people can spend the same amount of time in the same course and learn very different things."

At its core, CBE addresses this problem by measuring competencies rather than time spent in the classroom. Many CBE programs are still linked to the credit hour, in part because federal financial aid is traditionally approved for programs based on credit hours. The U.S. Department of Education does consider programs with alternative models, such as College for America's direct assessment degrees, which allow students to progress as their own life and work schedule permits.

3. Innovative financial models

Many CBE programs are embracing innovative financial models that make getting a college degree accessible to a greater slice of the population.

At College for America, for example, there are no semesters. Instead, students sign up for a six-month term for a flat subscription of \$1,500. During that time, students can work through projects as quickly as they are able. With enough dedication to the program, a student could complete work that's equivalent to an AA program in half the time, says Heidi Wilkes, chief academic officer at College for America. "We have had students complete an AA degree in two six-month terms, which means they achieved their AA degree from SNHU for \$3,000."

That model helps eliminate the burden of student debt for many College for America students, who are typically working adults supporting families. In fact, if the student's employer offers tuition assistance as an employee benefit, a student in a College for America degree program can potentially earn their degree without any cost to them.

For more on this topic: [Is Fear of Student Debt Holding Your Employees Back?](#)

4. Flexible staffing roles and structures

In a traditional higher education program, a faculty member may be expected to do everything: design the curriculum, design assessments, teach the content to students, grade coursework, and act as an academic mentor. “It’s a tall order for one person to be really excellent at all of those things,” says Wilkes.

According to the Public Agenda report, 98% of CBE programs surveyed agreed that it was important to provide learners with a solid support structure and mentorship opportunities from faculty and staff. When that is a part of a faculty member’s job description, however, some students can fall through the cracks.

To make academic support a bigger priority, some CBE programs use a disaggregated faculty model, where the above aspects are unbundled and assigned to specialists. That includes roles such as **learning coaches and faculty reviewers** who work proactively with individuals to provide them support and encouragement to make sure they stay on track with the program.

5. Producing proficient and prepared graduates

As discussed above, students who graduate from a CBE program must have demonstrated mastery over the competencies they are studying — which is why CBE graduates are generally well equipped with the skills they need for the workplace.

Demonstrating mastery can take several forms. Because College for America’s CBE program is based on project assessments, students submit projects to dedicated faculty reviewers, who are often practitioners in the field. The reviewers use a comprehensive rubric to evaluate projects for mastery on specific criteria. For each criterion, the student is either assessed to achieve mastery, or **they are told “not yet.”** The assessment comes with a comprehensive written evaluation and targeted and actionable feedback.

Students who score “not yet” have a chance to revisit the concept and work at it until they have achieved mastery. This not only provides them the chance to improve their skills, it teaches them how to receive and respond to constructive criticism and feedback, which is a critical skill in the workplace.

For more on this topic: [Developing Academic Skills That Transfer to the Workplace](#)

Different approaches serve different organizational missions

CBE programs are highly variable, in part due to unique student demographics and the mission of each organization. Some programs may only apply limited aspects of CBE rather than embracing the model as a whole.

College for America is designed to make higher education accessible to a broader portion of the United States population. Our mission is to help working adults improve their lives and have their chance at a better career. To serve that mission, College for America has established a CBE model that is flexibly paced, affordable, and provides a substantial support structure to assist students through the entire experience.

<https://www.snhu.edu/about-us/newsroom/2017/10/5-critical-elements-of-competency-based-education>