

# What to Know About Competency-Based Online Education

Imagine being able to receive college credit for the skills and training you've gained throughout your career or the opportunity to test out of course material that you have already mastered. Consider the flexibility and value of a program that allows you to earn your degree at your own pace and focuses on developing the real-world skills you'll need to land a job after graduation. Competency-based education (CBE) offers these advantages and more to degree seekers from many different backgrounds. Use the guide below to find out more about CBE and see if it might be the right fit for you.

## What Is Competency-Based Learning?

Competency-based learning is a system of schooling where students acquire college credit through demonstrations of what they know and can do rather than by typical coursework comprised of assignments, projects and exams. CBE offers the ability to earn credit for prior work and life experience, to advance through a course of study at your own pace, and to apply your knowledge in ways that are directly tied to skills currently in demand by employers.

While assessments and projects are still very much a part of this system, what differentiates competency-based learning from traditional programs is the system's flexible pacing, task-oriented assessments of learning and direct connections to work and industry.

## How Do Competency-Based Programs Work?

Competency-based programs work by awarding college credit to students demonstrating they have mastered a particular set of skills or "competencies" specified by their courses of study rather than through the typical credit-hour unit. Mastery is demonstrated by a "direct" or "authentic" assessment, which could be a project, portfolio, simulation or a typical examination.

For students who already have certain skills and knowledge acquired through work or life experience, some assessments may require little preparation to successfully complete, while assessments covering unfamiliar concepts and tasks will require more time and effort.

CBE programs are typically structured as either a subscription service or time-based format. For a subscription-based service, students pay a flat fee each term in exchange for access to all of the learning resources and assessments in a degree program's course of study, then renew their subscription until they have completed all the coursework. For a time-based format, the school predetermines the number of competencies students should master within a certain time frame.

## **COMPETENCY-BASED LEARNING**

### **Cost**

Based on time to complete course. For students able to complete their programs quickly, the cost savings are substantial.

## **TRADITIONAL LEARNING**

### **Cost**

Based on tuition set by each school. While some schools charge lower tuition for students taking over 12 credits, cost is largely fixed.

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## **COMPETENCY-BASED LEARNING**

### **Grading**

Based on acquisition of learning and skills as typically demonstrated through performance tasks. Students can obtain credit more quickly for what they already know.

## **TRADITIONAL LEARNING**

### **Grading**

Based on combination of assignment completion, assessment scores and adherence to coursework scheduling. Students obtain credit at the same rate as their peers.

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## **COMPETENCY-BASED LEARNING**

### **Coursework**

Primarily project and skill-based. Students are provided resources and largely “learn by doing” to demonstrate mastery. Some programs deconstruct courses into lessons or “modules,” which students complete at their own pace. Students can move more quickly through projects or modules that cover areas of strength.

## **TRADITIONAL LEARNING**

### **Coursework**

Varies by instructor, school and course of study. Can range from skill development to establishing foundations of knowledge in a field of study. Ranges from project-based to performance on assignments and formative and summative assessments. Usually involves a substantial amount of book reading and academic writing.

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## **COMPETENCY-BASED LEARNING**

### **Objectives**

Based on industry standards and applications to specific career paths.

## **TRADITIONAL LEARNING**

### **Objective**

Based on standards of learning in fields of academic study.

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## **COMPETENCY-BASED LEARNING**

### **Pace**

Individualized. Determined by student ability to complete projects, assessments, lessons or modules. Students with prior knowledge and expertise can accelerate their pace.

## **TRADITIONAL LEARNING**

### **Pace**

Fixed. Determined by courses required for a course of study and how many a student can complete in a fixed timeframe, typically a semester.

## **Competency-Based Learning Pros & Cons**

# **PROS**

### **Pacing and Flexibility**

### **Flexibility and Flexibility**

The most important selling point of a competency-based learning program is the flexibility it provides. Students are primarily awarded credit by what they can demonstrate they know rather than by completing courses on a particular schedule. Students with a higher level of prior knowledge and expertise can complete their programs faster than in a program with a rigid course of study with a fixed timeline.

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### **Prior Knowledge and Experience**

Students in competency-based programs can often leverage what they already know to complete familiar work tasks more quickly. In some programs, students can opt out of these tasks altogether by way of a summative assessment.

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### **Application**

The work and resources in a competency-based program are frequently aligned to industry standards and career environments, which makes for a highly relevant and applicable learning experience.

## **CONS**

### **Cost**

While there is a high potential for cost savings with a competency-based program, the inverse is true for students who cannot commit a significant amount of time to their studies. For subscription-based programs in particular, it is possible for a student to pay thousands of dollars for a subscription fee and make very little progress toward completing a course of study.

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### **Credit Requirements**

Most programs require a large number of transfer credits to enroll, particularly in general education coursework. Students who are just starting a course of study or college in general may not be eligible.

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### **Format**

Not everyone is suited to the flexibility a competency-based education affords. Students in a CBE program should be self-directed learners who are comfortable with a high level of independence and can manage and organize their time while juggling other obligations.

## Who Benefits from a Competency Program?

### **Military Service Members**

For service members in particular, this model affords them the ability to translate whatever training they may have received into credit for applicable competencies in their respective programs of study. The more training a service member has received, the more he or she stands to gain in applying that training toward a related degree.

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### **Working Adults**

As with many online schools in general, working adults and those with family obligations benefit from the ability to make competency-based programs fit a schedule that works for them. Moreover, working adults can directly apply whatever relevant skills and competencies they've acquired in the workplace to their courses of study.

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### **Returning to School**

For students who are returning to school and who already have substantial transfer credits, a competency-based program represents one of the fastest pathways to obtaining a degree.

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### **Career-Oriented**

Competency-based programs are primarily focused on a specific career path or a field of occupations, so it is best suited to a student who is either aiming to work in a particular career or advance in their current career.

## Competency-Based Programs Details

Examples of available degree programs include:

- Bachelor of Science: Accounting
- Bachelor of Science: Business Administration
- Bachelor of Science: General Information Technology
- Master of Business Administration: Health Care Management
- Master of Science: Sport Psychology

### **Program Costs**

The potential cost and savings of an online competency-based program can vary depending on the type of degree one is pursuing and the school itself, much like a traditional program. While competency-based programs are still relatively new on the scene of higher education, a recent [study on competency-based education \(https://www.forbes.com/sites/tomlindsay/2018/03/27/new-study-less-expensive-competency-based-education-programs-just-as-good-as-traditional-programs/#18fd556a674d\)](https://www.forbes.com/sites/tomlindsay/2018/03/27/new-study-less-expensive-competency-based-education-programs-just-as-good-as-traditional-programs/#18fd556a674d) from Forbes concluded that on the whole, competency-based programs are less expensive than their traditional counterparts, with subscription-based programs offering the greatest potential for cost savings.

## Competency-Based Bachelor's Degree Spotlight

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### Purdue University Polytechnic Institute



(<https://polytechnic.purdue.edu/degrees/transdisciplinary-studies-technology>)

Purdue offers a Bachelor of Science in Transdisciplinary Studies, a newly-created major that features a competency-based program centered around hands-on, team-based projects. The program allows students to create their own custom plans of study by selecting varying combinations of competencies from technology-focused fields such as computing and graphics, construction management and engineering and aviation technologies. While some courses may be available online, the degree is only for students who attend the campus at Purdue Polytechnic.

As a key element of the school's "Purdue Moves" initiative focused on enhanced accessibility and value, the program bills itself as "an educational experience unlike any other because it combines individualized learning with close mentoring by faculty experts and a competency-based curriculum which clearly defines each ability, skill, behavior, and body of knowledge that you'll master."

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Western Governors University ([https://www.wgu.edu/about\\_WGU/competency-based-education](https://www.wgu.edu/about_WGU/competency-based-education))



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Southern New Hampshire University (<http://collegeforamerica.org/for-students/competency-based-education/>)



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University of Wisconsin System (<https://flex.wisconsin.edu/>)



## 10 Things to Look for in a Competency-Based Program

While competency-based online education is being hyped in some circles as the future of higher education, there are potential drawbacks. With this in mind, there are a number of things to look for when selecting a quality competency-based program.

## 1. Accreditation

Make sure that any program you are considering is accredited by a federally-recognized accrediting institution to guarantee your degree is honored by other schools if you elect to transfer or advance your education elsewhere. This is also a requirement for eligibility to receive federal loan assistance.

## 2. Support

Look for a program that offers a high level of academic, technical and career support. Even if you are a self-driven student with a talent for organization, odds are at some point in your program you will need help.

## 3. Relevance

Search for a program that will develop competencies that are specific to your career or to the one you are pursuing. As part of your search, ask for a degree plan or a course of study to see the most detailed information.

## 4. Cost Effectiveness

Calculate and contrast the costs of obtaining a degree from a competency-based program with that of your local college to see which program is the most economical for your situation.

## 5. Free Trials

Some programs offer a free look at some of their resources and assessments. Whenever possible, take advantage of these opportunities. If a school doesn't already offer a free trial, try asking an admissions representative to provide one.

## 6. Flexibility

Find a school that works for you and your unique situation. Any program is useless if you don't have the time or the life structure to complete it.

## 7. Positive Reviews

Some schools offer testimonials from graduates of their programs. Whenever possible, also look for reviews on online sites or forums to see what current students and graduates have to say about the school.

## 8. Transferability of Credits

Programs that accept a large number of credits from your prior education are programs that will cost you less in the long run. When researching a school, be sure to thoroughly investigate the program's policy and process for transferring credits to your degree.

## 9. Credit Opportunities

Look for schools that are willing to grant credit for your previous training and career experience. Also, many programs will allow you to take direct assessments for credit to demonstrate your prior knowledge and base of skills.

## 10. Likelihood of Finishing

Unlike traditional schools that are built on a widely-recognized system of credit hours, competency-based programs award credit that is inherently difficult to transfer to other schools if you decide to move elsewhere. For this reason, make sure to find a program that you are reasonably confident you can complete.

## The U.S. Department of Education Weighs in on Competency-Based Education

In 2013, a "Dear Colleague" letter of guidance was issued regarding competency-based education by the Office of Postsecondary Education, a branch of the U.S. Department of Education. Key points and requirements from the letter included:

- "An institution that wishes to award Federal Student Aid (FSA) funds in a program using direct assessment must apply for approval from the Department..."
- "An institution must demonstrate that its institutional accrediting agency has reviewed and approved its offering of the direct assessment program."
- "If the institution plans to make changes to the program that would affect any of the information provided in its application to add a direct assessment program, it must obtain prior approval from the Department by reapplying."

In essence, while the U.S. federal government officially recognizes schools with competency-based programs as valid institutions of higher learning, there are strict controls over how these schools are run to maintain their eligibility to offer Federal Student Aid.

## Additional Resources



Bureau of Labor Statistics Occupations Handbook (<https://www.bls.gov/ooh/>)

Provides the most current statistics including annual median pay, job growth projection, and state and regional data on all major occupations and career fields.

College Navigator (<https://nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator/>)

Search for any school in the U.S. and find detailed information including tuition cost, retention and graduation rate, and accreditation status.

FAFSA Help Page (<https://fafsa.ed.gov/help.htm>)

Provides information, troubleshooting and FAQ's on the FAFSA, and how to complete it.


FinAid (<http://www.finaid.org/>)

Comprehensive resource providing the most current financial aid information, advice and tools.

LinkedIn (<https://www.linkedin.com/>)

Billed as the world's largest professional network, with more than 562 million users worldwide.

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