

# 101: COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION



**higher  
learning**  
ADVOCATES

## WHAT IS COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION (CBE)?

Competency-based education (CBE) is a type of postsecondary education organized around learning outcomes rather than how much time a student spends in a classroom or in a course. Some colleges and universities have CBE curriculum and programs, while others organize the entire institution around this model.



**COMPETENCY = demonstrated ability to apply knowledge, skill or set of skills, and intellectual behaviors, such as collaboration, critical thinking, and problem solving.**

## HOW DOES CBE WORK?

CBE is different from the traditional form of postsecondary education, which is largely built around how much time a student spends in a classroom or in a course. In the traditional instructional model, a student's time is translated into a specific number of credit hours allocated toward their degree.

By contrast, students' knowledge and skills in competency-based education are measured by demonstrating performance and understanding through a set of assignments and exercises, such as direct assessments, adaptive learning, and captured lectures. In a CBE model, students either demonstrate competency or they don't. A student passes a competency once they have demonstrated—or mastered—a required skill.

Since some students may learn concepts more quickly than others, CBE allows students to learn at a personalized pace. Through a CBE model, students do not accumulate credit hours; they move toward their degree or credential by demonstrating the required competencies.

## FEDERAL POLICY AND CBE

There is a mismatch between federal student aid policy and how CBE programs are designed. The credit hour is a measure of how much time a student spends in a classroom and on coursework at an institution and remains at the core of our current student aid system. However, since CBE

### Federal Student Aid Policy

- Built on time (through the credit hour and terms)
- Centered on faculty engagement (through Regular and Substantive Interaction)

### CBE Program Design

- Built on competency, regardless of time or terms
- Variety of ways to interact with and progress through

measures learning through demonstration of competencies rather than the number of credit hours a student accumulates, the existing federal student aid system requires the equating of CBE programs to credit hours. This process of equating credit hours often conflicts with, and complicates, the design of CBE programs, which are intended to measure mastery at a student's pace rather than just learning time. Also, students learn and interact with educational material, faculty, and peers in a variety of ways in a CBE program, rather than a traditional program that relies on standardized interaction with faculty.

## RECENT FEDERAL POLICY CHANGES



### Higher Education Act

In 2005, the U.S. Congress amended the Higher Education Act (HEA) to make direct

assessment programs—a form of CBE—eligible for federal financial aid, which made it easier for those CBE programs to participate in student aid programs. However, federal regulations still require institutions to fit CBE programs within the traditional credit hour framework. As Congress works toward updating and reauthorizing the HEA, a growing number of advocates and institutions have proposed policy changes to enable institutions to more easily utilize federal financial aid programs for purposes of creating high-quality CBE.



### Experimental Sites

In the mid-1980s, Congress authorized the Experimental Sites Initiative to allow the U.S.

Department of Education to conduct small scale experiments on new proposed student aid distribution policies and programs to learn what works. Essentially, this initiative is a “try before you buy” program, providing the Department with flexibility to allow higher education institutions to test and evaluate innovative practices that would require changes to federal policy. The Department currently has an ongoing CBE experimental site that offers institutions statutory and regulatory **waivers** for providing Title IV aid to students when conducting eligible CBE programs.

## CBE: A MODEL FOR TODAY'S STUDENTS

Today's students are more diverse than ever before, and lifelong learning and continuing education are becoming the norm. As a more flexible, responsive model, high-quality CBE programs have shown they can be adept at serving students with schedules that require learning outside the traditional academic calendar and older students who already have substantial work experience and some college credit.

Today's students need postsecondary education to be flexible and fit into complex schedules that often combine study with work and family commitments. Federal policy should adapt to reflect these various learning models and the changing pathways between learning and employment. Done correctly, competency-based education represents a powerful tool for advancing degree and credential attainment, promoting stronger career outcomes for today's students, and strengthening America's workforce and economy.

For more information about our work on competency-based education, please contact **Emily Bouck**, Policy & Advocacy Director, at [ebouck@higherlearningadvocates.org](mailto:ebouck@higherlearningadvocates.org), and visit [www.higherlearningadvocates.org](http://www.higherlearningadvocates.org) to learn more about our work.