Competency-Based Education (CBE):
Higher Education’s answer to the call for change

The US Department of Education offers a clear definition of CBE: “Transitioning away from seat time, in favor of a structure that creates flexibility, allows students to progress as they demonstrate mastery of academic content, regardless of time, place, or pace of learning. Competency-based strategies provide flexibility in the way that credit can be earned or awarded, and provide students with personalized learning opportunities.”

Unpacking this simple statement sets free a mind-boggling array of implied changes in higher education core practices and even the underlying assumptions that guide practice. CBE disrupts our traditional thoughts about teaching and learning and helps us re-examine epistemology, pedagogy, and technology, all with a focus on the student. It’s a powerful engine to help higher education focus on bringing value to the lives of its learners.

This short paper by Blackboard’s Enterprise Consulting team provides institutions with a perspective on CBE as well as basic considerations when developing CBE programs.

1http://www.ed.gov/oii-news/competency-based-learning-or-personalized-learning
CBE appeals to institutions for a variety of reasons, including Employability, Accountability, Affordability, and Accessibility:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employability</th>
<th>Accountability</th>
<th>Affordability</th>
<th>Accessibility</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Competencies clear to employers</td>
<td>Value clear to learners</td>
<td>Lower costs for learners</td>
<td>Accessible learner options</td>
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<td>Ensuring learners possess competencies, knowledge and skills needed to advance in the workplace.</td>
<td>Replacing grades with demonstrated mastery of a defined set of competencies.</td>
<td>Decoupling learning from a time-bracketed system.</td>
<td>Using technology to address challenges offering synchronous or face-to-face meetings.</td>
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But the primary reason is they want to provide a better way to serve learners who:

- may have **prior education and work experience** they can leverage toward a credential
- want want a **special skill set** that will change their jobs and lives
- are looking for education where they have **control over their investment** in money and time
- can leverage their digital skills to **personalize** their educational journey
- want the flexibility to access education **on their own time**

By its very nature, starting a CBE program will introduce change, ignite passion, and reinforce a clear focus on learners. In addition to developing or redesigning the educational component of a program, the institution must address related policies and processes to help shape the introduction of CBE at an institution.

CBE is not about launching a few courses and putting them online, nor is it about developing a new type of academic certificate or degree program confined within traditional borders of academics. It requires design, planning, deconstructing and reconstructing the curriculum, and creating a whole new model of educational delivery.
It is important to consider the student journey within a course-based CBE program.

The CBE student lifecycle can look very different from that of traditional programs, even though the same offices are involved. Changes may be required to accommodate rolling admissions and enrollments; academic support services may need to be adapted for on-demand student support; satisfactory academic progress for financial aid purposes may need to be re-defined; faculty roles may need to be disaggregated; and intrusive advising and coaching models will play a critical role in student and program success. Note, instructional technology, in the form of 24/7 user support, will also face challenges.

Almost every component of this institution’s existing infrastructure will be impacted by CBE. Institutions may have to adapt billing practices; change registration procedures; create new institutional research mechanisms; and experience new demands on instructional technology and design. The earlier these offices are involved in CBE discussions and plans, the more likely program implementation will go smoothly. From the perspective of the institution, there are a number of institutional resources that need to be brought to bear in a coordinated way to support the CBE student journey and ensure ongoing success.
If you are thinking about launching a CBE program, here are some critical questions to structure your approach.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Key considerations</th>
<th>Implications</th>
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| A foundational guide defining CBE at the institution, its purposes, goals, strategies, governance, and key metrics | • Is governance process for CBE clearly defined and assigned?  
• Are strategies, goals, and metrics clearly defined and articulated? Where?  
• Who owns the initiative and do they have the positional authority to effectively engage the functional units across the institution? |
| A rigorous CBE program identification, market research and selection process | • Are we building the right CBE program for our students?  
• Which market trends are driving growth in our CBE programs?  
• What population segments should we be targeting? |
| An operational plan to guide the successful launch of a CBE initiative including technology readiness, roles, responsibilities, milestones and risk mitigation across functions within the institution. | • Has technology been assessed and determined ready?  
• Have (faculty, designer, leadership, IT) roles and responsibilities been clearly defined and articulated?  
• Does everyone know the milestones and dates? |
| An effective marketing and recruitment plan to attract and enroll the target populations for the CBE program | • How will we create effective marketing campaigns for our new CBE programs?  
• How can we drive brand awareness to reduce student acquisition cost  
• How can we optimize our media and marketing strategy? |
| A comprehensive and detailed statement of program competencies and subcompetencies, measurement rubrics, and alignment between competencies and assessments | • How can we develop a curricular model that is useful for initial and future CBE programs?  
• Who is responsible for researching, defining, organizing, and stating the program and course level competencies?  
• Who is responsible for aligning each subcompetency with each formative and summative assessment?  
• Who is responsible for creating assessment rubrics?  
• What skills do they need to succeed? |
| A comprehensive plan for student success including academic, technological, advisement, coaching/mentoring, and CBE-specific support | • Are the student support tasks and associated roles clearly defined and articulated and assigned?  
• Which roles will be part of the program: coaches/mentor, advisors, graders, etc.  
• Are the task responsibilities and impacts well understood by the providers? |
| Course design requirements-and-definitions plan for CBE courses to maintain consistent high quality and high impact courses | • Are course design requirements clearly understood?  
• Are design and implementation responsibilities clearly assigned?  
• What is the process for evaluating and improving the course over time? |
| Course development services to produce the courses needed for CBE delivery | • Who provides course development services, and to what extent?  
• Who will provide initial uploads of competencies within platform; physically map goals and goal sets to courses; keep historical data of reporting on goals; provide technical assistance on goals edits ongoing.  
• Who is responsible for mapping goals and competencies to courses and providing assistance moving forward? |
| A dedicated program manager to coordinate complex tasks and projects needed in order to ensure readiness of the entire system on the date desired | • Are course design services in place and known to all stakeholders?  
• Is a program manager assigned to the project and known to all stakeholders? |
| Manage process, provide content, editing, and briefing for substantive change process with regional accreditor | • If necessary, who will lead the process toward approval by accreditation agencies? |

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