

AUGUST 2016

# Key Characteristics of Postsecondary Competency- Based Education Programs:

## A Descriptive Rubric

---

Innovation and iteration have resulted in competency-based education (CBE) programs with structures and characteristics that can vary widely from institution to institution—and even between programs on a single campus. Rigorous research on these programs depends on being able to clearly describe *what* is being investigated. As a result, American Institutes for Research (AIR) has begun to develop a *descriptive* rubric that (1) identifies critical features of postsecondary CBE programs and (2) details a series of facets that further describe how those features are evidenced in a specific program. This version is still a working document, and will be updated as the field evolves.

This rubric is meant to help you describe the key features of a *single* program at your institution, though you may find that even one program has more than one answer to each question. To help anchor your responses to that program, please indicate which program you are responding about at your institution before beginning.

Program Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Level of Study:

- Certificate
- Associate's degree
- Bachelor's degree
- Other, specify: \_\_\_\_\_

Cameron Smither, Kelle  
Parsons, Audrey Peek, and  
Matthew Soldner



## Institution and Focal Program Characteristics

<b>Feature</b>	<b>Facet A</b>	<b>Facet B</b>	<b>Facet C</b>	<b>Facet D</b>
<i>How has the institution integrated CBE into its organizational structure?</i>	The CBE programs are part of a stand-alone college/school/arm.	The CBE programs are being developed across the institution based on interest/need.	The institution offers only CBE programs.	
<i>Is the institution approved by the U.S. Department of Education (ED) for direct assessment for this program?</i>	Yes	No, but in progress	No, not in progress, but intend to pursue at some point	No plans to pursue direct assessment approval
<i>Does the CBE program have a non-CBE equivalent?</i>	Yes; the CBE program has a non-CBE equivalent program (same subject area).	No; the CBE program does not have a non-CBE equivalent.	No; all our programs are CBE, so we do not have a non-CBE equivalent.	
<i>When applicable, is the CBE program intended to serve a different population than the equivalent non-CBE program?</i>	Yes; it was explicitly designed to target a new “audience” not generally served by non-CBE programs at our institution (i.e., working adults).	No; it was designed to cater to all students, including those enrolled in non-CBE programs.	Not applicable because the institution only offers CBE programs.	

*Continued on next page.*

Feature	Facet A	Facet B	Facet C	Facet D
<p><i>Does the CBE program formally require that students meet certain criteria to participate in CBE?</i></p>	<p>Yes; students must meet certain criteria to enroll in a CBE program (in “Comments” below, please describe the criteria and how they may be the same as or distinct from non-CBE students).</p>	<p>Yes; students must meet certain criteria to be eligible to continue participation in CBE courses throughout their program (in “Comments” below, please describe the criteria and how they may be the same as or distinct from non-CBE students).</p>	<p>No; students are not required to meet certain criteria to participate in CBE programs/courses, but students are advised to help determine their best fit.</p>	<p>No; students are not required to meet certain criteria to participate in CBE. CBE enrollment is at the student’s discretion.</p>

*Comments on Institution and Focal Program Characteristics:*

## Development of Competencies

Feature	Facet A	Facet B	Facet C
<i>How were competencies developed for this CBE program?</i>	Competencies were developed "from scratch," either by the campus or the instructional content provider, for the whole program.	Competencies for the program were developed partially "from scratch" and partially mapped from existing traditional course/program structure or content.	Competencies were developed to fit/interface with the existing structure or content of the equivalent non-CBE program/course.
<i>Are competencies in this program mapped to industry standards?</i>  <i>(Circle all that apply.)</i>	No	Yes, based on feedback from industry leaders	Yes, based on a certification test, licensure tests, or a codified set of standards

Comments on *Development of Competencies*:

## Assessment

Feature	Facet A	Facet B	Facet C
<i>Does the program use authentic or standardized assessments?</i>	The program primarily uses authentic assessments (i.e., students perform real-world tasks).	The program primarily uses standardized assessments.	The program uses a balance of authentic and standardized assessments.

Comments on *Assessment*:

## Instruction and Student Support Roles

Feature	Facet A	Facet B	Facet C	Facet D
<i>In this program, the roles/responsibilities below are performed primarily by (check as many as appropriate):</i>	Faculty	Specialized staff	Other	Not part of the CBE program
<i>Academic advising</i>				
<i>Course content development</i>				
<i>Instruction</i>				
<i>Assessment development</i>				
<i>Assessment scoring</i>				
<i>Career advising</i>				
<i>Coaching</i>				
<i>Competency definition and alignment</i>				
<i>What mode of instruction is most common in this CBE program?</i>	Online: most or all courses are offered fully online.	Hybrid courses: most or all courses have online and in-person components.	Blended program: some courses are offered online; some are offered in-person.	In-person: most or all courses are offered fully in-person.

*Continued on next page.*

<b>Feature</b>	<b>Facet A</b>	<b>Facet B</b>	<b>Facet C</b>	<b>Facet D</b>
<i>How are courses or competencies structured/packaged in this CBE program?</i>	Competencies are stand-alone; students enroll in competencies one at a time.	Competencies are stand-alone; students enroll in competencies with the option of enrolling in multiple simultaneously.	Competencies are combined; students enroll in a "course-like object" that fully contains multiple competencies.	Competencies are combined but span courses; students enroll in a "course-like object" that contributes to, but does not fully complete, one or more competencies.

Comments on *Instruction and Student Support Roles*:

## Programmatic Flexibility

<b>Feature</b>	<b>Facet A</b>	<b>Facet B</b>	<b>Facet C</b>	<b>Facet D</b>
<i>Can students take CBE and non-CBE courses?</i>	Yes; once enrolled, each student is able to select between CBE and non-CBE offerings during the same term.	Yes; each student can move between CBE and non-CBE offerings each term, but not in the same term.	No; students who enroll in a CBE program cannot easily move between the two unless they "transfer" the credit.	Not applicable; no non-CBE courses are offered.
<i>Are CBE students able to adjust their pace of course completion (e.g., accelerate)?</i>	Yes; students are able to progress through competencies at their own pace with nearly no restrictions (with an exception for maintaining a minimum pace for financial aid).	Students have limited ability to progress through competencies at their own pace (i.e., they can only register for new courses on defined dates).	No; the program has a defined pace/course structure that students follow over a specified time.	

<b>Feature</b>	<b>Facet A</b>	<b>Facet B</b>	<b>Facet C</b>
<i>To what extent are students in this program able to determine their own course sequencing?</i>	Students have the ability to choose their course sequencing with no restrictions.	Students have the ability to choose their course sequencing with some restrictions.	Course sequencing is established for this CBE program.
<i>Are CBE students in this program allowed to enroll/work in multiple competencies/courses simultaneously?</i>	Yes; students are allowed to enroll/work in as many competencies/courses simultaneously as they wish.	Somewhat; students are allowed to enroll/work in multiple competencies/courses simultaneously, but there are restrictions on how many can be in progress.	No; students work through individual competencies/courses in full before beginning work in any subsequent competencies/courses.

Comments on Programmatic Flexibility:



## Financial Aid and Tuition

Feature	Facet A	Facet B	Facet C	Facet D
<i>Are CBE students able to receive federal financial aid to pay for CBE programs/courses?</i>	Yes; current students can use federal financial aid to pay for CBE programs/courses.	No; students cannot currently use federal financial aid to pay for CBE programs/courses.	Not applicable; students are not charged for participation in CBE offerings.	
<i>How are students in this program charged for participation in CBE offerings?</i>	Students are charged a set amount per period during which they can progress as much as they wish as long as they meet financial aid minimum requirements (full subscription model).	Students are charged a set amount per period during which they are able to progress as they wish with some restrictions (partial subscription model).	Students are charged per competency or credit/clock hour regardless of other base fees (per-unit model).	Students can choose to pay either for a subscription or per course.
<i>Is the institution participating in ED's Experimental Sites Initiative? If so, which option?</i>	No or other experimental site: _____	Yes; the institution is participating in the ED experiment related to Split Disbursement.	Yes; the institution is participating in the ED experiment related to Satisfactory Academic Progress.	Yes; the institution is participating in the ED experiment related to Subscription Period Disbursement.

Comments on *Financial Aid and Tuition*: