What Have We Learned About CBE?

Key Lessons Learned:
Postsecondary Competency-based Education

Postsecondary competency-based education (CBE) is promoted by advocates, colleges, and policymakers as **a promising, learner-centered approach to help more learners complete high-quality postsecondary credentials.**

The Project

With funding from Lumina Foundation, AIR implemented a four-year initiative to:

- **build rigorous evidence about CBE's efficacy,**

- **support responsible and evidence-based CBE expansion, and**

- **grow and diversify the community of researchers studying CBE.**

Work conducted by AIR and the National Research Collaborative research partners centered on a broad research agenda, which identifies three key areas of inquiry about CBE and related practices:

- **foundational knowledge about the landscape, efficacy, and equity of CBE,**

- **CBE program design and implementation, and**

- **public perceptions of CBE.**

Research partners' projects focused on specific research agenda topics. **This resource summarizes cross-cutting lessons learned** that begin to address the research agenda's areas of inquiry and ultimately inform the actions taken by policymakers, practitioners, and learners.

CBE and COVID-19

We did not anticipate the massive shifts to teaching and learning—or to general campus operations—that occurred in 2020. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, most or all colleges transitioned to emergency remote learning, meaning they tried different pedagogy, assessment, and coping approaches along the way. Faculty and administrators recognized key nonacademic issues affecting learners' work other than effort or ability. Adding to this, widespread protests and consciousness-raising led to calls for social institutions, including higher education, to examine how their current structures and culture uphold racial injustice and inequity. For more information on how the events of 2020 affected CBE adoption and perceptions, please visit www.air.org/cbesurvey.

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Lessons Learned from the Research

The following lessons learned are based on:

*The icons below indicate the sources for each point;
select the links above for more information and full reports.*

CBE programs have the potential to support equity for adult learners and other non-traditional learners.

The flexibility and opportunities for acceleration and individualization that CBE programs offer may be key supports for adult learners who are not well served by traditional models.

CBE programs may serve a greater proportion of adult learners and learners with prior credits than traditional programs.

CBE's potential to recognize prior learning can support learners with extensive training or on-the-job experience but no degree, like working professionals or military servicemembers.

CBE programs need to be coupled with supports for learners and data, as well as metrics that are relevant to CBE.

Learners of many backgrounds—not just adult learners—choose CBE when given the option. However, in one model, learners in CBE were more likely to withdraw and earn lower grades, which highlights the importance of student support and program design.

Institutions need new metrics to characterize CBE learner enrollment patterns, particularly when a benefit of CBE is flexibility, allowing for periods of pausing and returning, and even acceleration —none of which are well-captured in current metrics.

CBE adoption efforts span all institution types and are motivated by the potential of CBE to support workforce readiness and improve learning outcomes, but adoption is complex.

CBE adoption remains piecemeal; many institutions adopt some but not all elements of CBE. Most institutions regard CBE as an approach that fits certain programs or certain learners, rather than the primary mode of operation for the institution.

Increased familiarity with technology tools and remote teaching and learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic have influenced institutions' motivations for adopting CBE, as have perceived shifts in the broader higher education landscape.

Strong relationships with trusted peers or expert organizations support implementation and adoption of CBE; well-known or established CBE programs are particularly influential in supporting those building new programs.

Adoption of complex practices, like recognizing military prior learning, might benefit from both state legislation and state agency (or system office) support. This support could include clearer and more frequent communication through multiple channels; learners and faculty need timely and consistent information about policies around prior learning recognition.

Research-based models for intentionally incorporating equity into competency definitions and assessments can support CBE program development.

Recommendations

For state policymakers interested in expanding CBE (state systems, agencies, or legislators):

- Remove obstacles to and provide support for implementing CBE and related practices. For instance, our studies suggest that mobilizing CBE content expertise and technical assistance from other institutions or providing start-up grants to support program development may be useful steps to take. In addition, systems can provide more direct support to institutions around policies aimed at prior learning recognition.

For institution leaders considering CBE or interested in adopting it:

- Coordinate between advising, recruitment and admissions, and academic departments to **provide clearer and more consistent information to learners regarding recognition of prior learning, especially prior to enrollment.**

- Consider **tailoring messages about CBE programs or course offerings with adult learners' needs in mind.** Lessons learned from AIR's studies and the National Research Collaborative research partners' work demonstrate that the flexibility and personalization that CBE offers can be especially helpful for adult learners.

- Approach program design with an equity lens at each step, including developing competencies and assessment approaches that reflect the experiences and perspectives of learners of color and the populations that graduates will serve as professionals, and building data systems or metrics that accurately reflect and support adult learners' enrollment patterns.