



Competency-Based Education: A Gateway to Drive Student Enrollment and Success



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The Need for Change in Higher Education

There is a perception that many higher education institutions in the U.S. are not preparing students for success in today's more complex economic environment. This concept is having a direct negative effect on student enrollment. Meanwhile, tax-funded support for higher education also continues to decrease. In fact, many states have adopted a system where funds to support higher education are directly tied to metrics such as graduation rates or job placement.

Recent economic downturns have also changed the mindset of many incoming students, who are worried about getting admitted to college but not being able to afford it. Other students are worried that they will not earn enough after graduation to pay off student loans, hindering the justification for the investment. Other concerns about higher education include the student loan crisis, soaring tuition costs, low graduation rates, disparities in outcomes of minority students, and poor employment for graduates. In fact, a 2020 survey by Inside Higher Ed¹ found that 72 percent of college presidents said they are either very or somewhat concerned about the "perceived decrease in value of higher education."

Despite concerns, however, there is data that points to the benefits of pursuing and completing a postsecondary educational journey. According to College Board's report, Education Pays 2019: The Benefits of Higher Education for Individuals and Society,² the median earning for individuals who had a bachelor's degree was nearly

\$25,000 higher than individuals with a high school education in 2018. The report also found that roughly 69 percent of high school graduates were employed in 2018, compared to approximately 83 percent of individuals who attained a four-year college degree.

While data and statistics point to the financial and employment benefits of earning a certification or degree from a college or university, not all students who decide to obtain a college degree go about the process in the same way. The advancement of mobile and digital technologies as well as changes in the professional world have outright shifted the way students today are pursuing postsecondary educations. In many cases, individuals forgo the traditional route of attending a four-year university immediately after graduating high school to follow more immediate professional opportunities in today's unpredictable economy. As a result, many higher education institutions are looking to offer different, more innovative learning experiences that can attract a wider range of students.

One such option is the competency-based education (CBE) approach. Through a CBE program, institutions enable students to succeed by demonstrating their comprehension and mastery of a subject, as opposed to measuring success off traditional metrics like attendance and standardized tests.



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Demand Calls for New Learning Environments

Many higher education students look much different today than they did a few years ago. The traditional learning journey was to graduate from high school and immediately attend a college or university within a few months. The situation is often quite different today. While many individuals still follow this conventional path, not everyone does. In many cases, individuals who have long since graduated high school, including veterans, parents, and full-time workers, are attending institutions to further their professional development. These folks, who fall under the "new student" identity, are pressuring institutions to accommodate more flexible and efficient learning styles.

The new student is busy and doesn't have the time to attend college or university full time; they work, have families to look after, or have tighter budgets. Today's students want flexible, personalized, and highly productive education experiences. Rather than sit in a classroom for a handful of hours every day, students want to be able to access learning materials on their schedules.

At the same time, today's extremely competitive professional setting is influencing individuals to challenge traditional educational norms. In many cases, it is more valuable for individuals to demonstrate a mastery of a subject to an employer than to showcase a four-year degree with top honors. Skills like critical thinking and decision-making can be more relevant for a job than a 4.0 grade point average. Meanwhile, advancement in some careers relies on the development and proficiency of specific skills and competencies, like welding and HTML coding.

All these changes are forcing an evolution in higher education, which is giving way to CBE. With a CBE program, institutions can attract new students who want to streamline their education journeys and be able to demonstrate a mastery of a subject to potential employers.

What is CBE?

According to EDUCAUSE,³ "The competency-based education (CBE) approach allows students to advance based on their ability to master a skill or competency at their own pace, regardless of environment. This method is tailored to meet different learning abilities and can lead to more efficient student outcomes."

CBE offers more flexible education opportunities that are tailored to the specific needs that individuals require in the workplace. Through a CBE program, curricula are designed around specific competencies and skills. Students are permitted to take their time, learn at their own pace, and ultimately demonstrate these competencies when they are ready. This shift from conventional time allotment-based learning journeys can be very attractive to people who do not have the freedom to attend college full time, including adults with families. In fact, according to a survey of more than 5,000 students enrolled in a CBE program, the American Institutions for Research (AIR) found that 69 percent are between the ages of 25 and 49.⁴

Competency-based education programs can also be tightly integrated with the job market. Because a CBE approach follows the ideology for students to demonstrate competencies, faculty and institutions often work with specific employers for a better understanding of the skills that students should master. This enables students to feel secure in knowing they are being guided down a path of their choice with hands-on coaching from an industry in which they want to be successful.

An Uptick in Adoption

Competency-based education journeys are attractive to many of today's students. As a result, there has been a steady incline in adoption among higher education institutions. In a 2019 survey of more than 600 institutions, AIR found that 65 percent of respondents have a CBE program in place or are in the process of building and implementing one.⁵ Another 23 percent of responding institutions said they are interested in adopting a CBE program. Seventy-six percent of institutions said they expect CBE programs to become more popular across the United States in the next five years. Given the slow and steady adoption of competency-based education programs, it's worth exploring why institutions are pursuing and implementing the approach.



65%

of higher education
institutions have a
CBE program in place
or are building one

What are the Benefits of CBE?

Given the highly competitive nature of the professional world and the need for talent to stand out, the proliferation of the new student throughout higher education environments, and the constantly shifting expectations from students in general, institutions are looking at CBE as a means to attract a broader group of students and guide them down more efficient pathways to success. While looking at CBE, numerous benefits stand out, both for the students and for institutions. It's important to look at these separately but holistically.

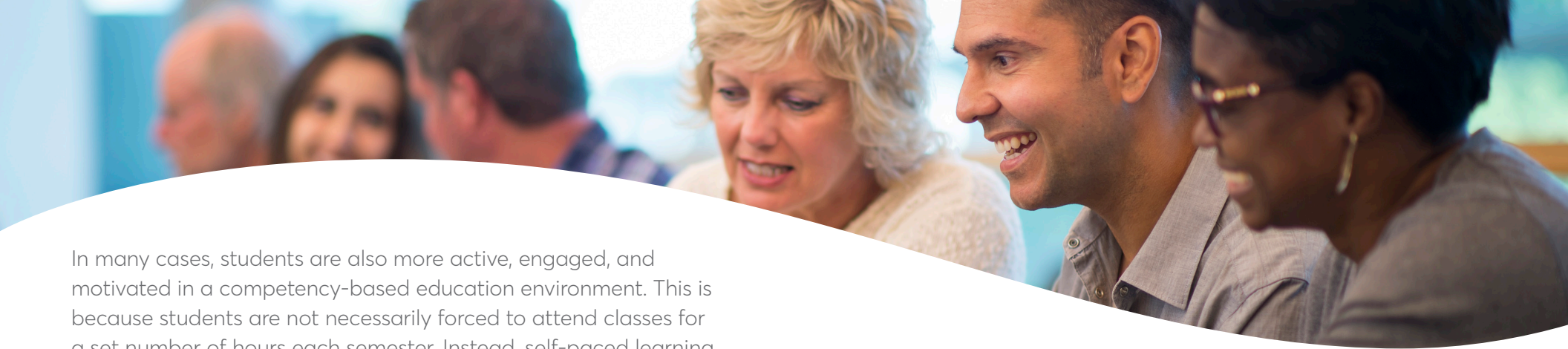
Student Outcomes

One of the primary benefits of a CBE program for students is greater flexibility and personalization, but that's not the only advantage. Student success during and after their education is a leading driver and benefit of a CBE approach.

► Increase Student Satisfaction

In a CBE environment, students and faculty can develop closer, more personal relationships, as faculty can spend more time on specific students and their challenges. Given the flexible nature of CBE, the programs allow for more hands-on interactions, which can cultivate engagement, reinforce the deep learning and mastery of a subject, and improve student satisfaction.





In many cases, students are also more active, engaged, and motivated in a competency-based education environment. This is because students are not necessarily forced to attend classes for a set number of hours each semester. Instead, self-paced learning means individuals will complete the tasks they choose on their own time. Therefore, progression is self-motivated and internally driven.

Meanwhile, the coursework in CBE programs is often more challenging due to the self-paced learning and skills-driven methodology. Naturally, this encourages stronger engagement and, as a result, greater mastery of a subject.

As previously noted, the flexibility permitted in a CBE environment is among its primary student-oriented benefits. A competency-based education approach offers flexibility for students who have work schedules or family lives that make traditional classroom attendance difficult. This is a significant appeal to the new student, a group of individuals who are permeating the higher education environment. With a CBE program, institutions can be more attractive to these individuals.

► Increase Long-Term, Post-Completion Success

While some students attain a higher education for the joy of learning new things, many students pursue a certificate or degree from an institution for the opportunity to further progress their professional careers. In this sense, competency-based education approaches can be highly effective.

Today's workers need to be lifelong learners, as more and more industries are adopting and leveraging technologies and practices that are constantly changing and evolving. As a result, individuals must be regularly trained and educated on new methodologies and the use of new technologies. Through a CBE program, individuals can complement their existing knowledge with continued education that can be directly translated into the professional world.

In many CBE programs, faculty work directly with local businesses to identify the skills workers need to succeed and incorporate those competencies into educational journeys. Through this approach, CBE students can become more attractive employees, as they will have the specific skills that are required for certain industries. For example, healthcare professions as well as computer science occupations (among the two most common CBE disciplines, according to AIR) are constantly changing due to regulatory issues and technology evolution. Through a CBE program, individuals in these domains can demonstrate their evolving competencies and master new skills to become stronger candidates for positions that require unique and evolving skillsets.

Institutional Outcomes

In addition to supporting student outcomes, an institution can experience numerous advantages when implementing a CBE program.

► Increase Student Enrollment

CBE programs are highly attractive to many of today's students. A CBE strategy's flexibility extends to the institution by allowing faculty to offer additional curricula, certificates, and programs. With flexible, learn-at-your-own-pace environments, institutions can attract new students who may not have had the time to invest in a conventional classroom-based strategy.

Additionally, institutions may see enrollment spikes due to a CBE program's ability to attract local employees who want to hone their skills or master new competencies that will support their professional advancement. By working with local businesses for direct insight into which skills are needed for long-term success, institutions can attract employees from those organizations or individuals who want to succeed in that organization's industry.

► Increase Student Retention

Retention is a significant challenge in higher education. With a CBE program, faculty and staff can build more personalized relationships with students to improve experiences and retention as a result. CBE is self-paced, which means faculty have more time to support and guide students down direct pathways to success.

In a conventional learning environment, many students fail before they receive the support they need. When a CBE program is properly established, institutions have already set up mechanisms to support students if they are struggling with new concepts. This enables a more continuous and seamless learning journey.





69%

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between the ages
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A competency-based system can also incorporate blended learning, mixing theory and practice. This tactic is meant to elicit more engagement and demonstrate specific tactics required in the workplace. Students often find this hands-on approach more attractive and effective for learning.

► **Develop Globally Competitive Graduates**

Traditional learning environments can be biased based on faculty—unintentionally or not. Some teachers may emphasize the importance of one domain or another based on their personal preferences or experiences, which can skew learning outcomes and professional development. Rather than relying on an individual teacher's beliefs, a CBE program asks that students demonstrate their mastery of a skill through pre-defined competencies based on real-world requirements.

By design, competency-based education systems are meant to promote what is best for students. Competency-based environments are built around a system of continuous improvement and deeper learning. This enables graduates to have more grounded and measurable skills that are required in the workforce. The professional success rates of students can be a great differentiator for institutions in an otherwise highly competitive and aggressive higher education environment.

Learn more at Jenzabar.com/product/student

Best Practices for Building a CBE Program

While the benefits and opportunities associated with building a competency-based education program are diverse, the launch of such a system cannot be done overnight. A CBE environment is much different than a conventional educational approach and it needs to be planned accordingly to avoid common pitfalls. Although there are numerous ways to go about building a CBE strategy, here are a few best practices that institutions should consider.

Begin at the End

When building a CBE program, institutions should start at the end by identifying the outcomes they want students to achieve. These outcomes can be derived from meetings with business decision-makers or industry professionals. Once these outcomes are established, the programs can be reverse engineered to ensure that students follow the path to demonstrate those outcomes.

During planning, institutions should work with students (and employers) for input. This will ensure that student outcomes, employer goals, and institutional objectives are aligned.

Avoid Traditional Standards

Most institutions know what goes into building an academic program; there are pre-defined, standardized metrics to leverage and past experiences to utilize. When building a CBE program, however, institutions must do their best to avoid building the system around conventional outcomes and tactics.

In a CBE environment, goals and outcomes need to extend beyond simply "learning" a subject and earning an arbitrary grade. Instead, competency-based systems need to be designed around how students can demonstrate their knowledge and expertise in certain areas. Institutions must ensure that students acquire, develop, and master the skills they need to capitalize on social and economic opportunities.

Focus on Motivation and Self-Regulation

Like any successful learning program, CBE initiatives need to drive engagement on behalf of the learner. But unlike other programs, students need to do more than just absorb and retain information; individuals must be able to prove they learned a skill via demonstration.

CBE programs should highlight and emphasize long-term outcomes, which should drive student engagement and motivation through the system. Meanwhile, faculty need to encourage self-regulation due to a CBE program's learn-at-your-own-pace operations. While there can be a lot of personalized support in a CBE program, students need to regulate their progression to succeed.

67%

of higher education institutions expect CBE programs to grow in popularity during the next 5 years

Promote Accountability and Visibility

At the end of the day, a student's success in a CBE program is based on their ability to demonstrate a mastery of a subject. This accountability is integral to an individual's success. As such, institutions must reinforce and promote accountability by empowering students with the tools and resources they need to progress.

Additionally, it is important to convey transparency in a CBE program. In a traditional learning environment, students know they need to complete a set number of courses to obtain a degree in an area of study. This visibility is vital to all higher education journeys, including through a competency-based program. While the outcomes may be different, it is still critical that students can see the trajectory in front of them so they know what must be done to succeed.

Start Small

When building a competency-based education program, institutions should consider starting small before launching a full-scale initiative. One effective tactic is to build a pilot program and perform ongoing checkups and evaluations. Institutions can learn from the successes and failures of a pilot system and build more effective approaches as they go.

It's also important for institutions to remember that a CBE program doesn't have to be an all-or-nothing scenario. CBE can be a small, large, or mixed system that caters to individual student needs; it doesn't have to be a campus-wide endeavor.

Leverage the Right Technology

A comprehensive CBE approach will need to incorporate (or link to) an institution's student information system (SIS) and be flexible enough to allow for configuration. This will allow institutions to define and configure competencies and categories, track and manage student and group progress, and integrate the program with other tools and solutions used across campus. The SIS should allow for open enrollment and early exit, as this is a key component of CBE (i.e., learn at your own pace). Because it is crucial to show a potential employer proof of a competency, the SIS should be able to display the completion status on current transcripts or supplemental transcripts.



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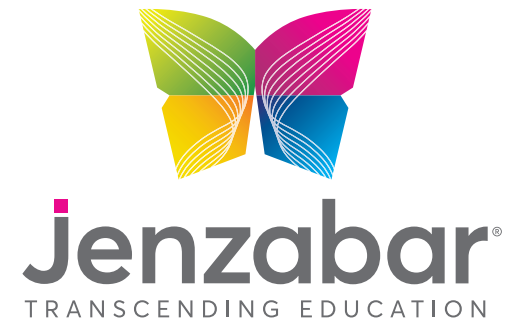
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About Jenzabar

Created out of a passion for education and a vision for technology, Jenzabar offers disruptive, innovative software solutions and services that empower students' success and helps higher education institutions meet the demands of the modern student. Over 1,350 higher educational campuses harness Jenzabar solutions for improved performance across campus and a more personalized and connected experience for the student.

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