

What is competency-based education, and how does it work?

By Brian Fairbanks

In today's world, doing things faster and better is almost always an advantage, even in education. With **competency-based education** (CBE), students can do just that. By offering course credit for demonstrating mastery of a measurable skill or competency, CBE can provide an expedited pathway to both gaining new career skills and earning a degree.

How does competency-based education work?

CBE programs focus on demonstrating what you can do. Other programs may spend a fixed amount of time in each course. Flexibility, working at your own pace and greater affordability (by shortening the time to graduation) are just a few of the benefits.

CBE programs are designed for professionals who want to learn new and valuable skills. They are also for learners who have a core set of competencies they've acquired through life and work experience. CBE tends to focus on projects and assignments that enable students to demonstrate their understanding of core job components. At the same time, students impart new skills which can be added to their toolboxes. Skills can be used for real-life application in the workplace.

Additionally, the flexibility of CBE programs enables students to better balance life, work and school.

Competency-based education vs. traditional education

Doris Savron, vice provost of colleges at **University of Phoenix**, notes that CBE “allows students to set the pace for how they want to progress through the material and assessments based on using knowledge they already have to demonstrate mastery in a competency area. Students have flexibility as to when they do the work, which allows them to adjust for their life circumstances and schedules.”

The structure of CBE programs is necessarily different from traditional courses. Faculty, for example, may guide students or facilitate programs rather than “lecture” course material. Faculty members also mentor and guide students. They provide specific feedback that supports student mastery of material as opposed to establishing set schedules and weekly assignment deliverables regardless of a student's past experience and knowledge. This tailored approach to education streamlines the process considerably.

Benefits of CBE

According to Savron, “A competency-based approach ... allows for learning that is personalized to the student, enabling them to move more quickly in content areas where they may already have competencies and can demonstrate those. This gives them the flexibility to spend more time in areas they need to upskill.”

Savron adds that people are busier than ever these days. They have family obligations, full-time jobs, long commutes and involvement in their community. Adult learners “don't want to waste time or money doing work where they already *have* abilities,” she says. “Students want to get right to the information and content they need to and want to learn. They can also have the confidence that the competencies they are demonstrating are valued by employers.”

And that's good news for employers. By achieving their credentials and/or competencies sooner, students can apply their capabilities right away in the workplace. CBE programs are, by nature, aligned with high-demand skills. Students are poised to add significant value to their employers.

In addition, assessments are built to measure mastery of those competencies. Mastery gives employers the confidence that student will contribute to the workplace.

CBE is often well suited to students who need greater flexibility to maintain a work-life balance. If you're worried about your busy life taking over your studies, Savron says, and if you "have some work experience, are comfortable with technology and want complete ownership over your learning but can self-direct, manage your schedule well and are self-motivated," then you are a prime candidate for a competency-based education program.

Competency-based education programs at University of Phoenix

Testing and rewarding your existing skills can benefit students with a variety of goals in a range of industries. For instance, if you have an Associate Degree in Nursing (ADN) and are working as a nurse, you might be interested in pursuing an [RN to Bachelor of Science in Nursing degree](#). With CBE, you might be able to earn this bachelor's degree in under a year, compared to two- or four-year degree programs in traditional education.

The same works for other [competency-based education programs](#), such as an [MBA](#) track, which can be completed entirely online (as with the above and below options).

Additional CBE programs are a [Master of Health Administration](#) degree and even a [Master of Information Systems](#) degree.

In the end, competency-based education programs are one more way busy professionals can pursue and achieve their academic goals. Programs can be completed with measurable results and more efficiently than in traditional classes – two more reasons to explore your CBE options.

Want to learn more? Check out University of Phoenix's [CBE programs](#) to see how you can get your degree in less than 12 months for under \$11K!