CBE Playbook

Competency-Based Education (CBE) has captured the imagination of many higher education institutions across North America. It promises greater flexibility for adult learners, potentially lower costs, and an assessment-driven approach that validates students who possess skills valued by employers.

Although CBE remains a relatively small part of the current Higher Education landscape, enrollments in CBE programs have quadrupled since 1990. Estimates say that as many as 750 CBE programs and more than 500,000 students could be a reality in the U.S. by 2020.¹

With the growing interest, there is an increased need for an organizing framework to plan, design, and implement CBE programs. We designed the CBE Playbook to help leaders manage the complexity of developing innovative CBE programs. It can help leaders craft proactive, intentional strategies to tie new programs to the unique needs, mission, and context of their institution and the students it serves. The playbook will help:

• Provide a comprehensive approach to strategy planning and execution
• Activate institutional engagement and cross-functional collaboration
• Promote planning for effective scaling
• Foster change leadership that helps inspire faculty and staff

Organization addresses key issues of institutional importance for the CBE program. These include determining the best financial model and financial aid framework, providing leadership for change, developing external relations, and managing the process for accreditation and approvals. The issues are complex and interwined and require a significant amount of executive-level engagement. Organizational work most directly confronts how CBE programs can radically change the model for higher education delivery and achieve the goals for expanded access, increased completion, and lower costs.

Program Development lies at the heart of Competency-Based Education. The challenge is to develop coherently aligned models for competencies, content, delivery, and assessment. CBE programs depend on high levels of flexibility to allow students to move at their own pace based on their own performance and prior learning. This workstream not only addresses the essential components of curriculum design, but also the delivery model and modalities. In addition, it allows examination of how the role of the faculty changes when delivering a CBE program.

Management of CBE programs involves resource planning, staffing, partnership and external relations, vendor relations, and tracking and reporting for overall program management. Regardless of the scale of the CBE program, staffing and external partnerships stand out as key management requirements. Staffing not only affects program quality and overall student experience, but also is one of the most significant inputs into the overall financial model and cost-savings potential. Developing external partnerships presents the opportunity to involve employers in defining and validating competencies, suggesting real-world assessments, and providing additional expertise and practical expertise to support the program and students.

Technology is at the heart of many challenges CBE programs face for two important reasons. Most legacy systems were not designed to support the requirements of these approaches, and CBE programs depend heavily on data analytics and reporting to effectively track and monitor student progress. The degree of challenge depends on the particular learning models and strategic approaches to designing the CBE program.

Generally, the further an approach is from traditional practice, the greater the need for customizing functions or adopting new systems with CBE in mind. Consider whether the platform allows for non-semester-based enrollment cycles, permits presentation of material in a self-paced modular format, and to what extent assessments are linked to other systems.

Marketing and Recruiting efforts must focus on those most interested in CBE programs, the messages that best articulate the unique value of a CBE approach, and the programs in demand by both students and employers. Messaging should also emphasize the key values of cost, flexibility, and degree of self-pacing designed to meet the needs of working adults or other specific learner populations. This is often a sensitive area because the CBE “branding” may be quite distinct from the traditional program and require a competitive analysis of other CBE programs rather than traditional competitors to differentiate the messaging.

Student Success is another area where roles and responsibilities can depart significantly from traditional models. Students in CBE programs may work in a self-paced, online model rather than a group-paced, classroom setting. The requirements for support and encouraging student retention and persistence relies heavily on personalized coaching and tutoring models. Progress and tracking data helps team members pinpoint which students need help and when.

The key is developing the right structure and supporting processes, aligned with the program competency curriculum and delivery model that provides optimal support for students.