

Quality Standards for Competency-Based Educational Programs



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Drawing on the *Shared Design Elements and Emerging Practices of Competency-Based Education*, leading program designers and system administrators from five C-BEN institutions representing an array of models have been working together over the last several months to create a first draft of Quality Principles and Standards for Competency-Based Programs. The C-BEN Quality Standards task force developed an iterative process and worked together throughout the spring and summer to achieve draft principles and standards that are universal enough to apply to all CBE programs, regardless of model variations. In the future, we envision these universal principles and standards will be augmented by additional stackable principles and standards based on model-specific, programmatic features.

Our aim with this work is to provide standards to the field that institutions can draw on to inform the design or scaling of high-quality programs, and that can provide guideposts and assurances to policymakers and accreditors tasked with regulating this vibrant, and still emerging, field of practice. The goal of this work has been to produce a draft to be vetted by the broader C-BEN community and the wider field. An online portal has been created to collect input on the draft and this feedback will inform the final version. Rubrics for each of the standards are currently in development and will be collaboratively developed by C-BEN members after the Standards themselves have been finalized through input from the field.

While the finalized Standards and associated rubrics will be released in early 2017, we know full well that the evolution of the field and evidence base will require that these standards be regularly reviewed and updated.

Key Definitions to Aid Understanding

Elements, principles and standards form the backbone for this set of Quality Standards. This set of Quality Standards focuses on the program as the unit of analysis, and begins by articulating elements, principles, and standards of quality CBE program design and implementation. While evidence is still emerging regarding the efficacy of CBE program design, it is time to put a significant stake in the ground around quality. This set of Quality Standards is intended to be both serviceable for informing program design and easing accreditation and subject to ongoing refinement and revision as the evidence base grows.

For clarity's sake, the terms used in this document are defined below:

Element: *The label or shorthand for the principle being described*

Principle: *A fundamental proposition that serves as the foundation for a system of belief, or behavior, or for a chain of reasoning*

Standard: *A level of quality or attainment, and an idea or thing used as a measure, norm or model in comparative evaluations*

Coherent, Competency-Driven Program and Curriculum Design

PRINCIPLE

Competency-based education uses an intentional and transparent approach to curricular design that provides a learner with a clear pathway to completion based on an academic model that builds a unified body of knowledge leveraging frameworks, disciplines, standards, workforce needs, and national norms. The model encompasses the level and complexity of the competencies that are congruent with achievement and sufficient to justify the award of the credential. Learners at the core of the program's design, with their needs being sufficiently addressed through the logic of the program and its associated assessment strategy. CBE programs are designed to be sensitive to racial, cultural, socio-economic, gender and other potential bias in design, delivery and implementation.

STANDARDS

- 1** The program encompasses an integrated sequence of curriculum which scaffolds competencies at multiple levels of learning in order to lead to mastery.
- 2** Opportunities for socialization with peers, faculty, staff, and employers are provided throughout the learning journey.
- 3** Learners are aware of the program's clear and coherent competencies and can articulate what they should know, understand, and be able to do.
- 4** Learners have access to faculty subject matter experts, who play an active, central role in the design and delivery of program, curriculum and assessment.
- 5** Learning environments and content are equally accessible to anyone admitted into the program, regardless of race, income, or ability status.
- 6** Learners are offered varied learning exercises, activities, and experiences to promote student engagement and to provide multiple opportunities for development of competency mastery.
- 7** Flexibility is built into the program's design to accommodate personalization and modifications to support individual learners as they develop and master competencies.
- 8** Learners are supported by proactive personalized, wrap-around services to ensure student success and mastery of competencies.


Clear, Measurable, Meaningful and Complete Competencies

PRINCIPLE

Each competency is explicitly stated and unambiguously provides descriptions of what a learner must master before program completion. The set of credential-specific competencies represent the complete taxonomy of the knowledge, skills, abilities, attitudes and beliefs deemed relevant and required by a prepared and proficient credential holder. Each competency explicitly states the theory and application of theory required for mastery at the appropriate level for the credential being earned. Each competency is also clearly connected to content and learning activities designed to support learners in developing proficiencies required by the program to award a credential and is able to be reliably and validly assessed.

STANDARDS

- 1** The set of competencies are clearly specified and provide easy to understand instructions for what the learner must know and be able to do in order to progress in and complete a credential.
- 2** Competencies are co-constructed with input from diverse communities including employers, expert practitioners, advisory committees, and professional/licensing bodies.
- 3** Individual competencies are indexed to explicit knowledge, skills, abilities, attitudes and behaviors that are relevant, current, and accurately depict what is needed by the field.
- 4** Competencies anchor, specify and guide the curricular design, development of instructional content, activities, remediation offerings and the assessment strategy.
- 5** Individual competencies correspond to cognitive levels of learning on recognized taxonomies, such as Bloom's, and the set of competencies blends multiple stages of learning.
- 6** Competencies inform and guide the construction of the appropriate learner experiences.
- 7** Competencies dictate the assessment strategy and allow the learner to demonstrate measureable and meaningful proficiency of the needed competencies.



Credential-level Assessment Strategy with Robust Implementation

PRINCIPLE

Effective and robust assessments are a key component since CBE is anchored by the belief that progress toward a credential should be determined by what learners know and are able to do. The overarching assessment strategy is comprised of individual assessments designed to both support the learning journey (often referred to as “assessment for learning” or formative assessment) and determine level of mastery (often referred to as “assessment of learning” or summative assessment). The assessment strategy provides multiple modalities of assessment intentionally aligned to learning outcomes and uses a range of assessment types to measure learning and the transfer of learning into novel contexts. The assessment strategy makes learning and assessments meaningful and transparent to faculty, staff, students and others.

STANDARDS

- 1** Individual assessments are built within and aligned to an overarching assessment strategy for the credential being earned.
- 2** The assessment strategy clearly articulates how the set of assessments supports the learning journey for students, determines mastery level, and matches the cognitive level of the competencies being demonstrated.
- 3** The set of assessments is designed to provide learners with multiple opportunities and ways to demonstrate competency and proficiency, including measures for both learning and ability to apply or transfer that learning in novel contexts.
- 4** The assessment strategy and each of the individual assessments equitably measure learning outcomes and alignment to educational progress across diverse student groups, while guarding against bias in the structure and accessibility of formative and summative assessment.
- 5** Faculty can articulate how each individual, freestanding assessment plays a critical role in the overarching assessment strategy.
- 6** Each individual assessment is transparently aligned to program learning outcomes and is rigorous with clear and valid measures.
- 7** Each individual assessment is authentic, able to assess what credential completers know and are able to do, and in what settings and situations.
- 8** Formative assessments serve as a tool for learning providing feedback for reflection and refinement while also offering a feedback loop that is timely and appropriate to the competency and intent of the assessment.
- 9** Summative assessments’ ability to measure application or the “can do” aspect of a competency is validated by a subject matter expert, ideally one external to the program design team.

Intentionally Designed and Engaged Student Experience

PRINCIPLE

CBE programs are designed with the student learning experience at the core of all decisions, processes, and systems. These programs offer proactive and personalized support for student learning through transparent pathways to the credential, supportive institutional policies and clearly defined learning outcomes. Faculty and staff are invested in and involved with the learner throughout the entire student lifecycle by designing, guiding and supporting the learning journey as well as through the assessment processes. Structured roles and responsibilities reflect an institutional commitment to enrich the learner experience with a full array of wraparound student services and social supports.

STANDARDS

- 1** The needs of the learner are the foremost consideration when structuring the work of CBE professionals (faculty and staff) into specific roles and responsibilities.

- 2** The program is sufficiently resourced with faculty and staff to meet the needs of college-level learner. Faculty and staff roles are designed to provide differentiated support that leverages the individual talents, strengths and competence of the faculty and staff.

- 3** Faculty and staff performance metrics are established and monitored, in part, on the ability to support all learners throughout the student experience.

- 4** Clear expectations are set with the learner regarding university policies, structure and expectations of the program, and tuition and fees.

- 5** Learners have access to and proactive engagement with subject-matter expertise, resources, tools and supports to be successful in acquiring and demonstrating the knowledge, skills, and abilities, required for successful completion of the program.

- 6** The faculty and staff use technology-enabled systems and processes to proactively monitor various data metrics to ensure the student is fully engaged and performing as anticipated throughout the student lifecycle.

- 7** The interactions, policies, processes, and resources are designed to provide wrap-around academic and non-academic support that is responsive to the evolving needs of the learner.

Collaborative Engagement with External Partners

PRINCIPLE

External partners such as employers, trade associations, academic professional and disciplinary associations, and governmental entities are deeply engaged in the design, delivery, and evaluation of the CBE program. These partners work collaboratively with the institution offering the CBE program to inform and even validate its competency definition, its curriculum and assessment of demonstrated competencies. Institutions strategically determine and secure the commitment of the right blend of external partners to achieve the program's outcomes and the institution's equity goals. The result is a relevant, transparent credential and accompanying learning experience that is trusted by the external partners as well as by its students.

STANDARDS

- 1** The program encompasses an integrated sequence of curriculum which scaffolds competencies at multiple levels of learning in order to lead to mastery.
- 2** In collaboration with faculty and staff, external partners are invested in and an integral part of the program by offering their own expertise and resources to ensure student success.
- 3** Faculty and staff and external partners regularly communicate with each other so both are kept informed of the latest developments and involved in appropriate ways.
- 4** Faculty and staff share their learnings with external partners by actively participating in and sharing information with reputable researchers, networks, and other professional organizations.
- 5** External partners keep faculty and staff informed of relevant developments which may necessitate programmatic changes, and the program reflects these developments when needed.
- 6** External partnerships are cultivated to provide real life learning, training and assessment opportunities.
- 7** External partners are chosen based on their alignment to program outcomes and field or workforce needs, and faculty and staff form new relationships where there are no pre-existing connections.
- 8** The selection of external partners should intentionally include those who can help advance and achieve the institution's equity goals.

Transparency of Student Learning

PRINCIPLE

One of the central differentiators of CBE programs is to make transparent the learning that has occurred in order to earn a credential. This means the competencies, the pathway to these competencies and the assessment methodologies are transparent to prospective and enrolled students, external partners and faculty or staff. The design of the program, alignment of competencies, competency assessment and learning journey are transparently articulated. As a final step, transcript recording and reporting of student learning is designed both for transparency and portability. Transcribing practices reflect the program design and goals by making learning transparent to students, faculty, staff, employers, transfer institutions, accreditors and regulators, and are often in digital form. Transcripts ensure portability and transferability within non-CBE environments and include an “extended or comprehensive record” with more details about the student’s accomplishments than is contained in a traditional academic transcript.

STANDARDS

- 1** The competencies required to earn a credential are transparently articulated to students, faculty, staff and external partners.
- 2** The alignment of assessments, learning materials/experiences and competency demonstration is transparently visible to all participants.
- 3** The alignment of competencies required for the credential to any external requirements (licenses, transfer requirements, certifications, employer needs) is accurately and transparently communicated.
- 4** The institutional transcribing policy and process should document student achievement beyond basic courses and grades.
- 5** The institutional transcribing policy and process should be designed to communicate what graduates can do, expressed in ways understandable and relevant to an expanded community of stakeholders utilizing the input and engagement of transfer institutions, graduate schools and employers.
- 6** The institutional transcribing policy and process should include a clear crosswalk to courses and credits in order to ensure effective record exchange for inter- and intra-institutional needs, transfer and enable effective conversion to traditional credit hours if students leave the CBE program.
- 7** The institutional transcribing policy and process should clearly address accreditor and/or federal requirements impacting transcript recording and reporting including a description of the methodology used to determine credit hour equivalencies for each competency and for the certificate or degree.



Evidence-Driven Continuous Improvement Processes

PRINCIPLE

A continuous improvement methodology is an essential dimension of competency-based education. In a CBE program, student performance data collected during the program and post-completion is used to prioritize improvement actions in student learning outcomes, program outcomes and institutional outcomes. More specifically, targets of continuous improvement include CBE design elements such as competency definition, assessment strategy and implementation, support for student learning impacting program persistence and completion and external validation of learning. Other related data such as measurements of post-programmatic outcomes and the enduring value of earned competencies in the knowledge marketplace may be monitored to inform larger shifts in the design of the competencies and credential being offered. CBE approaches often allow faculty to implement a range of instructional approaches to drive learners toward targeted outcomes. In these cases, alternate curricular pathways, content and instructional and service approaches are assessed against performance outcomes, and assessments are similarly evaluated against instructional pathways to assure the balance, validity and reliability of the instructional system.

STANDARDS

- 1** The institution has adopted a continuous improvement model for CBE program(s) and is committed to sharing data and learnings with the CBE community.

- 2** CBE program has documented program performance goals (including student outcomes) and action plans that outline evaluation methodologies and pathways to improvement.

- 3** CBE program has a data plan to support the performance goals; data is collected, analyzed and reported out.

- 4** The CBE program has effective approaches for monitoring, measuring, analyzing and reporting on performance data (including specific student outcomes) and the validity and reliability of results.

- 5** CBE program has established a systematic implementation of planned processes for improvement based on the data and an allocation of appropriate resources to support the work.

- 6** Key elements of the CBE program are continuously improved based on feedback from learners, faculty, subject matter experts, and employers.

- 7** The CBE program monitors improvements to assess their efficacy against programmatic goals (including student outcomes)



Demonstrated Institutional Commitment To and Capacity For CBE Innovation

PRINCIPLE

In order to produce a high quality CBE program, the institution must build a foundation in support of competency-based education. This includes the development of a CBE philosophy, the design of the program structure, and the definition of appropriate supports for the program and its learners, including people, policy and process supports. The institution must also make appropriate financial investments in the program, recognizing that such investments are often necessary both to achieve regulatory and accreditor compliance and to provide the learner with an adequate and appropriate support structure.

STANDARDS

- 1** The institution's senior leadership and board members support the creation of a CBE program.
- 2** The institution has defined and clearly articulated what competency-based education is, how assessment of learning takes place, and how the student ecosystem will be constructed to support these definitions.
- 3** The institution has developed and broadly communicated a robust faculty and staff model to support the learner, while efficiently utilizing institutional resources.
- 4** The institution has developed policies and procedures for CBE program(s) which support learning and the student experience, while maintaining compliance with regulatory requirements.
- 5** The institution maintains sufficient administrative capability to manage and support competency-based education programs.
- 6** The institution's CBE business model, including the tuition structure, has been analyzed to determine feasibility and sustainability.
- 7** The institution has evaluated technology needs to support the student ecosystem and, where appropriate, made investments.
- 8** The institution has ensured that its CBE program(s) have obtained all required regulatory approvals and meet all local, state and federal compliance requirements.

COMPETENCY-BASED
EDUCATION NETWORK 

A National Consortium for Designing, Developing
and Scaling New Models for Student Learning

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