



CAEL

# FACULTY AND ADMINISTRATOR VIEWS ON COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION

A REPORT FROM CAEL'S  
CBE JUMPSTART INITIATIVE

*Rebecca Klein-Collins*





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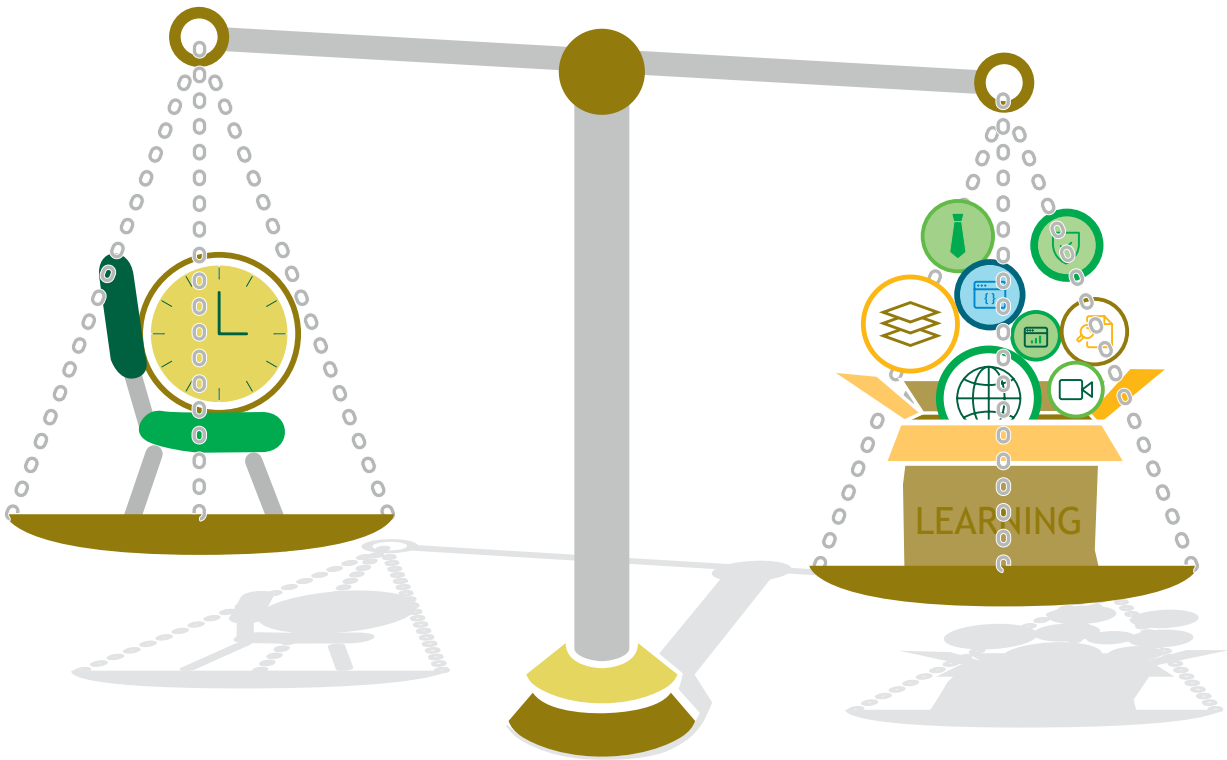
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## INTRODUCTION

Today's competency-based education (CBE) programs are offering students a unique postsecondary experience that focuses more on student learning and less on whether or how long a student has spent time in a classroom. The approach has been lauded by public officials as “a promising new delivery model” (Mitchell, 2015) and as having “the potential to transform education” (Laine, Nielson, Cohen, & Palmer, 2015). This approach is also seen as a disruption to higher education as we know it (Weise & Christensen, 2014; Soares, 2012). These programs focus on competencies rather than credit hours, require students to demonstrate those competencies through authentic assessments, recognize extra-institutional learning, and often expand faculty roles to include activities such as individual coaching.

All of these changes—and many others that are necessary when implementing a new CBE program—can be challenging for institutions to manage. But they can be made even more challenging in the absence of support from faculty. For this reason, many institutions make it a priority to educate and engage faculty early in the process of designing and developing CBE programs. Over the past two years,

the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) has been assisting institutions in this effort through its Lumina Foundation-funded CBE Jumpstart initiative, which provides CBE training workshops designed to educate faculty and staff about CBE and help them engage with CBE design considerations.

This report shares details about the impact of these workshops on the depth faculty and staff have in understanding CBE, as well as the degree to which these workshops may have helped to encourage institutions to move forward with CBE. In particular, interviews with trainees at participating institutions revealed that training on CBE can be valuable at very different stages of institutional engagement; that institutions benefit the most from learning about the various kinds of CBE models that are possible, and that training can sometimes play an important role in spurring institutional leadership and staff towards implementation.

While this study was conducted only on the CAEL-provided CBE training, the lessons from the self-study may be helpful to the entire field for understanding what institutions find most useful in the early stages of CBE planning and development.

## BACKGROUND

*Competency-based education* (CBE) is a term used for programs that focus more on what students have learned, rather than where or how long the learning takes place. Instead of evaluating student progress primarily on the amount of time spent in a classroom (using the credit hour, which is the default standard for measuring progress), students engage in learning activities and then progress towards a degree or credential by successfully demonstrating their skills and competencies through specially designed assessments. Some CBE programs have been designed to allow students to learn and progress at their own pace; some are leveraging technology in new ways to facilitate student-directed learning as well as cost savings for the student and ostensibly also for the institution. In addition to these benefits, many institutions are choosing to offer CBE programs as a way to improve the quality of higher education by focusing on evidence of student learning outcomes rather than seat time.

### *Design Considerations*

Institutions interested in developing CBE programs face a number of design considerations as outlined in a new Public Agenda publication (see next page).

Key design questions include:

- What competencies must students demonstrate, and how do we define these competencies?
- How will students learn in order to successfully demonstrate the competencies?
- What student support services are needed for students to be successful?
- How will the program assess for these competencies in a valid and reliable way?
- How will the competency framework map back to the credit hour for the purposes of a student transcript, student transfer, faculty workload, or financial aid?
- How will the institution support student learning through technology and manage internal business processes for a program based on competencies, rather than courses or credit hours?

- What are the roles and responsibilities of faculty in this new CBE program?

### *A Different Role for Faculty*

The more traditional role for faculty in higher education is as instructor—in the past, this has typically meant that faculty are the “sage on the stage,” lecturing to students to impart knowledge. In recent years, this model has been challenged in some institutions, with faculty experimenting with more active learning pedagogies or engaging with students as mentors (Hainline et al., 2010).

The format of many CBE programs is formalizing this kind of dramatic change in the faculty role. Faculty may have one or more of the following roles: 1) developing the curriculum, 2) designing and grading assessments, 3) providing support to asynchronous instruction, and 4) coaching/advising/mentoring (Cleary, 2015).

What is the impact of these changes in the roles of faculty on student learning? Researchers will surely be examining this important question as more of these programs emerge and as more students engage with them. However, past research suggests that the transformed faculty roles could have a distinct benefit for students. There is literature showing that student-faculty interaction notably contributes to student success, and that regular faculty mentoring and tutorial-style interactions are associated with greater student learning (Kezar & Maxey, 2014). By providing a formal structure for these kinds of regular student-faculty interactions, rather than assuming that they will happen spontaneously in a course-based format, CBE programs could be institutionalizing a critical student success factor.

### *Change Management*

The change in faculty roles is just one of the major issues institutions need to consider for a possible move towards CBE. There are a lot of changes that institutions need to plan for while involving a number of different stakeholders: not just faculty and leadership but also registrars, IT staff, advisors, financial aid experts, marketing departments, and so on.

# CBE SHARED DESIGN ELEMENTS

- Clear, cross-cutting, and specialized competencies
- Coherent, competency-driven program and curriculum design
- Embedded process for continuous improvement
- Enabling and aligned business processes and systems
- Engaged faculty and external partners
- Flexible staffing roles and structures
- Learner centered
- Measurable and meaningful assessments
- New or adjusted financial models
- Proficient and prepared graduates (Public Agenda, 2015)

CAEL knows from our work with institutions on implementing prior learning assessment (PLA) programs that certain shifts within higher education are significant enough—and may feel threatening enough to certain constituencies—that change needs to be managed in a deliberate way. For example, a lesson from our PLA experience is that educating key stakeholders is a critical first step towards making big evolutions possible. It is important to make sure that institutional leadership, faculty, and key staff all have the same background information, the same working definitions, the same knowledge about the pedagogy or theoretical underpinnings of a new program or approach. And it is critically important that inaccurate information is corrected and that any negative views are acknowledged, discussed, and worked through openly. CAEL, therefore, has dedicated a lot of our PLA work to educating the field on what PLA is, what it is not, and what pieces need to be in place for an institution to do PLA well. A key audience for this kind of educational effort is faculty, as they are not only the subject matter experts but also often the guardians of academic integrity within the institution. It is critical to have them fully

engaged with new ideas in order to ensure successful implementation of change.

With something like CBE, CAEL believed that providing education to key faculty and staff early on in an institution's exploration of CBE could also be important in helping to expand institutional knowledge and potentially fostering greater enthusiasm and momentum for design, development, and implementation of new CBE programs. Therefore, over the past few years, and with support from Lumina Foundation, CAEL has provided 18 postsecondary institutions and 3 postsecondary systems with one-day, on-site, CBE introductory workshops that we call CBE Jumpstart.<sup>1</sup>

The CBE Jumpstart training was offered to the participating institutions and systems in both web-based and face-to-face formats to groups of faculty and administrators. Each workshop was offered to a single institution or system so that the group discussions could focus exclusively on how CBE could work in that particular setting. The training covered:

- What competencies are
- How competencies communicate a student's progress toward a degree
- What CBE looks like in practice at various institutions
- What good practices in using assessment in CBE programs are
- What the various assessment tools and approaches are
- How faculty roles would change
- How to incorporate PLA into a CBE program
- How to incorporate CBE and/or competency-based assessment (CBA) into a PLA program
- How to develop a CBE program that is compatible with the institution's mission

These trainings were offered between June 2014 and November 2015.

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<sup>1</sup> The Jumpstart institutions and systems were selected through a competitive process. See Acknowledgments for list of participating institutions and systems.



# LESSONS FROM THE TRAINEES: TIMING, CONTENT, VIEWS OF CBE, AND MOVING FORWARD

The Jumpstart workshop training had three main objectives:

- To educate faculty and staff about what CBE is
- To educate faculty and staff about the potential benefits of a CBE approach in higher education
- To address concerns about CBE with the hope that doing so in an open way could help to encourage greater acceptance of—if not enthusiasm for—CBE

Pre- and post-tests were used to capture the immediate reaction of the 463 trainees. Overall, the greatest change from pre- to post-test was in the area of general knowledge about CBE. And while there were many trainees who also saw improvements in their views of the value of CBE and their personal opinions about CBE, the ratings suggest that the impact of the training in these areas was not as widespread when compared to the perceived gains in content knowledge. (See Appendix A for additional details on the pre- and post-tests.) In follow up interviews with 22 trainees (including some of the lead CBE staff) from 13 of the Jumpstart institutions and 2 of the participating systems conducted in December 2015 and January 2016 were more revealing than simple pre/post-test measurements, providing insights about:

- **Timing and Purpose:** The value that the training had, if any, for the institution at its particular stage of early CBE engagement
- **Training Content:** The specific parts of the CBE training that were particularly valuable, and other sources of information about CBE that have been valuable to the institution
- **Current views about CBE:** Positive views as well as lingering concerns about CBE
- **Moving Forward with CBE after Training:** The degree to which the training was helpful in sparking greater

enthusiasm for CBE and/or progress towards implementation

## *Timing and Purpose of the Training*

The Jumpstart training was designed for institutions in the early stages of planning a CBE program, yet the range of engagement with CBE varied widely among the various institutions. Nevertheless, regardless of what kind of “early stage” the institution was in, the CBE training served a purpose.

Some participating institutions and systems were very early in the process, with a small number of faculty or staff having done some preliminary research or having attended national CBE events or workshops. One trainee explained that the training was useful for his institution early in the process because he wanted to figure out if CBE was a real thing that the institution should be pursuing or if it was just a fad or a trend. He said, “There are so many trends in higher education that come and go. It was important to understand what this is. It takes a major commitment to move from a traditional approach to a competency-based approach. No one wants to do it unless there’s a level of certainty that it’s viable.” Another trainee, who considered himself somewhat of a CBE champion at his institution, wanted the training to be a way to introduce CBE to a wider group of faculty and staff. He ultimately found that the training helped “tremendously” by honing the institution’s focus. He said that the CBE training “helped bring people together... It raised objections so we understand how to address problems. It helped us engage with employers. Just knowing it’s a growing movement allowed people to consider something they might have dismissed.”

Systems leaders similarly wanted the training to help get more conversations started at and across individual institutions. One system representative said that the focal point of their participation was to “convince institutions to get on board.” Another concurred, saying that the training was



“an opportunity for us to say to the colleges ‘hey, we have technical assistance, you guys are into it, let’s come together and have a single conversation.’ [The training] allowed me to have a platform to have this discussion for all of the colleges—get them all engaged in the process, and be more intentional about moving programs in that direction.”

Some institutions had some kind of CBE task force already established and had done some research and preliminary planning as a group. For them, the Jumpstart training had two purposes. First, the training helped the core group to get on the same page in terms of content knowledge. One trainee explained that having individuals attend various national meetings and training was like “sending out scouting parties”; having the entire core group be part of a single training session gave them a stronger foundation from which to move forward. Second, the training allowed the core group to expand its circle and include other parts of the institution. After the training, “student services folks got it.” This meant, in some cases, that some of the trainees knew very little—or that they came to the training with a lot of skepticism. One trainee said that such a situation could have been a disaster if the skeptical ones had just dismissed CBE outright, but that didn’t always happen: “[The trainer] presented the [emerging] practices and this really opened the conversation. [Some were] skeptical, but they asked the hard questions. They were willing to explore it to the depths. It was a successful effort to show models, get conversations going, and answer questions.”

Some institutions not only had key stakeholders engaged but also a design well underway. These institutions similarly used the training to expand the knowledge base at the institution as a way to build internal awareness while, as one trainee explained, also “providing external validation and support around the team’s own ongoing development process.” Another institution that was further along in the planning process acknowledged that they came to the training with a lot of existing knowledge about CBE but still learning and wanting to have more dialogue about “the gray areas.” A trainee from that institution said that the Jumpstart training “allowed for that dialogue, and allowed for more folks around the institution to be part of that conversation.”

## Training Content

Trainees offered a lot of feedback on the content of the training, noting which parts of the training they found most valuable, such as how CBE may already be implemented within their institution, giving credence to its value; CBE’s correlation to PLA; and, particularly, learning about the range of CBE models.

## Value in Learning about Other Models

Interviewed trainees mentioned almost in one voice that one of the most important parts of the training was learning about the different CBE models that were already being implemented by various institutions. Many individuals came to the training with a preconceived idea about what CBE is, and they were excited to learn that CBE can be implemented in many different ways, depending upon the discipline, the institutional mission, the make-up and characteristics of the student body, available resources, the internal appetite for radical transformation of instructional delivery, and so on. Explained one trainee:

*We’ve seen the variety of models and feel like we don’t have to leap to the most aggressive form first. We can build it to scale it up over time....We really liked looking at other models. It helped us know that we can be creative, still get accredited, and accomplish the goal.*

Other participating institutions were likewise relieved that they could think beyond some of the archetypal CBE models that have adopted online, self-paced, Direct Assessment approaches. One trainee said that by showcasing various ways to do CBE, the training helped them evolve; “Now we see the potential for lots of approaches for CBE...CBE doesn’t have to be one way.” Another trainee mentioned that people at her institution assumed that CBE meant doing it the way one large national institution does it. “That’s not who we are,” she explained, “We want to offer a lot of different ways a student can participate in learning experiences, and demonstrate their learning in unique ways.”

Exposure to different models and approaches helped to introduce new concepts to some of the trainees—for example, subscription-based tuition models or various ways to convert credit hours to competencies.

One institution was able to see in a new way how it might use CBE differently for the technology-based parts of its program, compared to the non-technology parts. He said, “[The trainer], showed us examples of models and we started to look at things that happen in the classroom where we might shift the examples and replace tech aspects of the work that’s evaluated.” This demonstration helped them see how they might modify how they assess for some of the more technical competencies.

Exploring different models is also useful for converting some skeptics. If they only know of CBE as something offered by Western Governors University or College for America or Capella, they might find it easy to dismiss CBE as something that is offered primarily by non-traditional or for-profit institutions. Said one trainee, “When we started seeing University of Wisconsin... Penn State, schools that are more like us, doing CBE, we started to see things more clearly. It created more relevance—it could be something that’s done here at our university.” Another said that some faculty came out of the Jumpstart training saying, “Hey, I didn’t understand how many schools were into this!” Many are following up with these institutions to explore their models further. Said one trainee, “I wanted to connect with traditional universities that are making a transition—like us—and tap into what they’ve learned.”

Learning from others eventually goes both ways. A representative from one of the institutions that has since moved forward to implementation said, “Now, people are asking *us* questions—and we are getting calls!”

### PLA as a Pathway to CBE

Some institutions found that learning about how CBE relates to other higher education initiatives, such as PLA, is also very useful and provides a perspective that is not often covered in available CBE literature. This feedback from the interviewed trainees is not entirely unexpected, given that the competitive process for selecting the Jumpstart institutions/systems included as one criteria the institution’s history with PLA, and that the CAEL-developed training has a strong focus on PLA as a kind of “sister innovation” to CBE.

In CAEL’s view, there is a close relationship between CBE and PLA:

- They share a common underlying philosophy that higher education needs to value and reward what a student knows and is able to do
- Best practice for both assumes learning assessment that measures student learning against pre-determined criteria and not by a subjective process
- PLA and CBE have operational compatibility with each other; many CBE programs include PLA as a way for students to demonstrate competencies

CAEL has proposed that CBE and PLA exist on a continuum, with PLA providing a way to integrate a competency-based approach into more traditional course-based programs, or to be a kind of stepping stone to a fully competency-based curriculum and degree program (Tate & Klein-Collins, 2015). *It is important to keep in mind, however, that while both CBE and PLA introduce challenges under Title IV, CBE programs’ teaching and instructional components allow a clearer path to federal financial aid eligibility; most fees associated with PLA as assessments of learning are currently not eligible for federal financial aid.*

One system representative, who was a trainee, said that understanding the relationship between PLA and CBE contributed to her feeling more positively about CBE. She had already been working with institutions within her system to feel more comfortable with the idea of students earning credit for learning outside of a rigid course format. Because they had already had conversations around PLA, the institutions were primed to be receptive to this idea because of the strong emphasis on assessment of learning. Said the trainee, “PLA has opened a lot of conversations. It can be a gentler door to come through than CBE.” Similarly, another trainee noted that his institution’s history with PLA created a starting point. He said, “CBE to me has been the next step of PLA. They are related to each other. You can’t do CBE if you don’t have some form of PLA.”

## Revelations about Own Institution

Trainees also referenced how the Jumpstart training helped them better understand their own institution's history with CBE. One trainee mentioned how the institution's social work program had incorporated aspects of CBE, and another trainee noted that the institution's nursing program was centered around competencies. The training gave the participants the opportunity to understand how CBE was already being implemented in some way and how CBE might not necessarily be entirely new and radical.

One trainee recalled how faculty from the institution's aviation program came out of the training saying, "Hey, the FAA already does this, didn't you know that? The FAA has been doing this for a long time, and they believe in it and practice it." However, this revelation was accompanied by the recognition that, in the same program, mechanics in training are required to have 1800 hours working on an engine or pieces of an airplane in order to be certified. Trainees began to make important connections to their own programs—which ones are competency-based and which are frustratingly not. The trainee from the institution with the flight program said, "We discovered a lot of things like that—competency programs are here at our university, but we wished competencies were across the board."

## Current Views about CBE

### Enthusiasm for the Promise of CBE

In the follow up conversations with trainees, there was much that stood out for them as the positive aspects of CBE:

- **CBE is a good fit for adult students.** One trainee said that CBE gives adult learners "the maximum ability to take advantage of what they've learned in their lives." Others again made the connection between CBE and PLA and how students with prior knowledge can come to a CBE program and progress much faster. One trainee explained, "I really like that it's learner centered, it's so much about the student and what they know and what they bring to the table. It can focus on what they don't know, and it's less about knowledge

acquisition. Traditional students cram, dump it on a test, and then forget it. Here, they show competency and this addresses learning."

- **CBE gives students a way to talk to employers.** CBE helps students understand what is relevant in the workplace; as one trainee explained, "It helps students have a voice to say, 'Here are the specific things I've learned,' ...it helps them to look for jobs, helps them know how to talk to employers.'" Another noted how students who are currently employed can "apply their learning to their jobs" and the curriculum can be customized to their own workplace circumstances.
- **CBE gives institutions a way to work with employers.** One trainee said that CBE is giving her institution a way to engage employers differently, showing how the program is a response to a company's workforce development needs and that it can work easily with the employee tuition benefit.
- **CBE can provide consistency in assessing student learning.** A trainee observed that in traditional higher education, there might be three different instructors teaching the same class with different assessment methods, wildly different results in terms of student learning, and no real way to standardize. In that trainee's view, CBE solves that challenge.
- **CBE is self-paced.** Said one trainee, "You can't herd people together at the same time; they have different needs. You need to allow adults to master the competencies at their own pace. This is something we need to get into."
- **CBE is about learning and mastery, not time spent.** "I have never liked the Carnegie model. Just because you have your rear in a seat for a long time, you are competent in a subject? I like that CBE turns the whole notion on its ear. You are not just putting your time in, you are proving your mastery of a subject."

- ***CBE provides a framework and a reason for faculty to collaborate.*** This item in particular was appealing to system representatives. One shared that the purposeful approach to defining learning objectives has value within the institution. “Being able to get faculty together to identify learning outcomes and objectives...I’ve been seeking ways to get faculty across disciplines and institutions to come together and think more concretely about learning objectives and how we learn and measure them. I see a lot of intrinsic value in that.”

### Lingering Concerns about the Challenges

Despite the many promises of CBE, and the strong positive opinions that most of the trainees expressed, many admitted to having some lingering concerns about CBE. One set of concerns had to do with the sense that there was persistent faculty nervousness about (though not necessarily outright hostility toward) CBE. Some faculty apprehensions focused on whether there is enough proof that CBE would live up to its promise and others had to do with the changing faculty role. A second set of concerns had to do with student interest and engagement. A third category of uneasiness—and the most commonly mentioned by the trainees—had to do with the recognition that developing and implementing CBE would be a monumental endeavor and questions about whether the institution had the resources, in terms of both time and expertise, to succeed.

- ***General faculty skepticism.*** Recent early adopters of CBE have shared that one of the biggest obstacles to CBE may be general faculty resistance to it. While the Jumpstart training was designed to help address that resistance through education, the training may not have always been attended by the exact faculty or staff who most needed it, whether because of space limitations or because of imperfect information about where the biggest resistance would come from. Several trainees noted that this kind of resistance was still there—one thought that resistance was mostly confined to general education and humanities faculty (“Information technology has been great!”).

Some resistance is not because of wholesale objections to CBE but rather because of specific questions, such as whether the institution isn’t already doing something like this by focusing on learning outcomes, or whether there is enough data yet to draw firm conclusions about CBE in terms of student success. One trainee expressed concern that while CBE in theory is something that could address quality in higher education, in practice, there’s a lot of potential for it to be implemented badly. He said that there needs to be much stronger guidance in terms of best practices so that it won’t be “diluted into something that isn’t valid.”

Another quality-related concern was whether the online, self-paced CBE program model would suffer from the lack of student-to-student interactions at an institution where enrollments were not large. He said, “How in the world are we going to recreate the sort of learning that happens when students engage repeatedly in small groups? If you’re at the scale of WGU, you can just call on students to work in small groups. Not with us. At our scale, you can’t count on that, you can’t figure out how it would be viable.”

Faculty resistance is also related to the change in faculty role from an instructor in a course-based system to a coach/assessor/designer in a CBE program. Even after Jumpstart training and after additional conversations with CBE pioneering institutions, some faculty are not as on board as are the deans and others on the administration side. One trainee said, “On the faculty side, there was pure fear; they wondered, ‘How can I do this, how can I teach students?’” Another trainee reported that faculty are no different than anyone else—they are uncomfortable with any change, but particularly one that redefines their jobs in such a significant way. A trainee said, “Some people were comfortable with CBE, some had reservations. I had the impression that people left [the training] feeling they had their questions answered. There was generally a positive reaction, and



I'm optimistic. But, academics are involved, and it's so challenging to persuade them to do anything differently. CBE changes the faculty role and that can be threatening."

- **Concerns about student interest and engagement.** Some trainees expressed apprehension that CBE might not be a good fit for many students. One shared a story about someone he knew in a CBE program who was thriving but also knew about many other students who gradually dropped out of the program. "When you're doing stuff online, it seems like it'll be easier," he said, "but it's more work. It's hard. You have to be motivated." Another trainee added, "We'd do someone a real disservice if we signed someone up for CBE and they're not the kind of learner who could maximize the benefits of CBE."

Some trainees had worries about whether there would be enough demand from students to make it worth the effort of building a CBE program. Said one trainee, "I'm still very positive, but apprehensive in terms of being sure of scale, how many students we can attract, and what does success really look like for students....I'd like to hear from other institutions. It's still very grey."

- **Concerns about implementation.** Just about every trainee raised questions related to how the CBE program would be implemented. There were anxieties about expertise around learning outcomes and competencies; one system trainee said that she thought the Jumpstart training was a nice introduction, but afterwards felt like the institutions in her system needed additional in-depth training in how to write competencies and learning outcomes.

Several institutions voiced uncertainty about how to build the program in terms of infrastructure needs like the learning management system (LMS), the student information system (SIS), and other day to day operational needs. On the one hand, trainees bemoaned the fact that off-the-shelf data management solutions did not

yet exist, and on the other hand, they were fearful that once those systems did emerge in the marketplace, they might not be affordable. Other trainees noted how much work would be required to involve registrars, student services, and other important institutional functions. The heavy lifting involved to make financial aid work within the CBE framework is enough, said one trainee, to "make your brain hurt."

Several trainees were disquieted by whether the institution had the financial resources to make CBE a reality or not. Said one, "We actually had 100% buy-in from faculty. The problem: resources. Who has the time? How can you fund the development? Is [time spent on development] all voluntary? Are you kidding?" The trainees wondered how to support more training for faculty, how to compensate faculty in the program, how to charge students. "These are the things that are keeping me awake at night," said one trainee, "We got a little technical assistance, but we need a lot more."

Financial questions are also at the forefront when thinking about the long-term sustainability of a CBE program. Hearing other CBE pioneers talk about their financial models has not been encouraging; one trainee heard a representative of an existing CBE program say that the CBE program is not a way to make money, leading faculty to wonder, "What's the financial model and why would we do it if there is no benefit to us financially?"

## *Moving Forward: Idling in Place or Full Steam Ahead?*

The CBE Jumpstart training was designed to educate institutional faculty and staff on various models and design needs of CBE programs. In the process, it is possible that the training divulged how developing and implementing CBE might be more challenging an undertaking than may have been understood previously. Yet, the overall reaction to the training was positive, and many of the institutions involved in the initiative are moving forward in the planning and development process.

In our interviews, we asked whether the training had a role in fostering enthusiasm for CBE. Only two of the 22 interviewees said no—one because his faculty and staff were already far along in their thinking and were highly supportive of CBE already; and the other because of intense faculty resistance and a governing board that had decided to block any movement on CBE. The remaining interviewees had a lot to say about the enthusiasm generated by the training:

*“Sure, I think, in particular, a couple of people—and even in surprising areas such as philosophy. He came out like, ‘Wow, what an interesting way to think of things!’”*

*“It was hard to know what we needed to know. We didn’t have much confidence in our knowledge base. The training was a booster for us. [It] was affirming that our thinking was solid, far along, well aligned, where we need to be, ‘atta boy, go get ‘em tiger!’ That was our big takeaway—that our foundation was strong, we were on the right track, and that we have what it takes to move forward.”*

*“It’s the kind of thing that...generates a little bit of momentum. We were all ready to take the next step after the training....People were interested in learning more because we had questions: how you determine programs, how to navigate a system change, financial aid—those were the questions we had after the [training].”*

*“The training allowed us to use that info to get into the nuts and bolts of systems/departments of organizations, how we’d all work together. What I appreciated most—we broke into small groups, and allowed groups to do the investigation. We all walked away excited about the opportunities. We left excited! This is huge, this is big, this is different!”*

Months after the training, there is a range of progress that has been made. A full report describing the efforts of individual institutions will be prepared later in 2016, but among the sample of trainees from 13 institutions and 2 systems, one CBE program is up and running with students enrolled, another was to launch in January 2016, and a third will be launching by the end of the calendar year. One of the institutions was

piloting individual competency-based courses while developing internal policies to develop more CBE programs in the near future. Five more institutions were deep in the planning stages, and two more had reached the point of having fleshed out proposals for their programs.

Those institutions that were able to move forward seemed to have the right people in place, supportive administrations, and a real desire to move forward. Some of it may have to do with institution-specific factors; one of the implementers acknowledged, “Mostly people at [my institution] are used to moving quickly on program development. We are different than other institutions on how quickly we move on programs.” Yet the training was still seen as key to getting things going. Said one trainee from one of the implementing institutions, “The training was at a time where we were dipping our toes in, do we want to pursue this?” His colleague added, “If we hadn’t had [the trainer] come and do the presentation, we wouldn’t have gotten this far so fast.”

Institutions that have not seen progress are, for the most part, not saying that they admit defeat. Rather, the training fostered interest, but the momentum didn’t propel things forward at a rapid pace. Several trainees said the training was a good way to start the conversation, and one added that the people who attended the training are now seen as the innovators who want to do something. “So we’re poking at the interest...[saying,] ‘It sounds like you have the background to start the ball rolling. You’ll be the innovators on your campus.’”

There are trainee voices that seem discouraged about the chances for CBE implementation. A few noted that while the training was helpful for getting the conversation going, there was no momentum that followed. One trainee acknowledged that she and her colleagues are set in their ways. She explained, “It’s so easy to get up and lecture three days per week, use the text book and quizzes, and assess the student based on the tests and quizzes. All you have to do is lecture and make sure grading is done. That’s the norm of teaching. It’s hard to move that norm. Competency-based education upsets that.” Finally, nothing can happen when institutional finances are limited. One trainee said that they have the desire and the excitement, but no resources for innovation anymore due to severely restricted state funding. “For us,” she said, “it’s frustrating.”



## CONCLUSION

CAEL's Jumpstart training was designed to support institutions wanting to move forward on CBE. It provided a day-long workshop with basic information about CBE, important design considerations, various models that institutions might consider, and information about potential challenges that will need to be addressed.

The feedback from the trainees can help to inform other types of CBE education efforts happening elsewhere in higher education. In particular, we learned that the training helped to start important conversations within institutions; it helped “level set” the CBE knowledge of key stakeholders needed for planning and implementation; and, at several institutions, it fostered internal enthusiasm and excitement for CBE—enough to get programs launched or moving forward towards implementation.

The training was not, however, the silver bullet for every program—nor should it be! Training can provide valuable information and can even change minds and perspectives, but it is hardly fool proof and not likely to be able to address entrenched

faculty resistance to change or financial limitations that are well beyond an institution's control.

In some cases, the training introduced the trainees to implementation challenges that they might otherwise not have been aware of. That should be seen as an important outcome of the training: making sure that institutions go in with eyes wide open and aware of the task ahead of them. Knowing the complexities involved in program design and development—not to mention implementation—can help institutions be aware of the kind of time and resources that are needed, as well as the importance of involving other institutional players like the registrar and financial aid officials.

None of the views on CBE shared by the trainees were very surprising. In fact, they reflect the very specific content areas covered in the training. The trainees learned what was good about CBE and also what was challenging or unknown. Thus informed, they were able to move forward—or not—based on other institutional factors: enthusiasm from a core group, support from the administration, and perhaps momentum buoyed by a positive training experience.



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Community College of Philadelphia	Committee on Curriculum and Assessment
Davenport University	Pace University
Golden Gate University	Peirce College
Granite State College	The New School
Indiana University Purdue University—Indianapolis (IUPUI)	University of Cincinnati
Kalamazoo Valley Community College	University of Toledo
LeTourneau University	Valdosta State University
Lincoln Land Community College	Viterbo University
Los Angeles Trade—Technical College (LATTC)	Western Michigan University

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*The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of Lumina Foundation, its officers, or employees.*

## APPENDIX. PRE- AND POST-TESTS OF JUMPSTART TRAINEES

Pre- and post-tests were used to capture the immediate reaction of the 463 trainees. They were asked to rate on a five-point scale the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with a series of statements about CBE. These statements were crafted to address the trainings three objectives to improve CBE knowledge, understanding of CBE's value, and personal opinions about CBE.

The expectation was for trainees to indicate that their views about these statements had changed between the start and the end of the training—a “good” change was one in which the trainee saw improvements in CBE knowledge, increased understanding of the value of CBE, and more positive opinions about CBE. For example, a good change is one in which a participant would respond to the statement “I can define competency-based education”

with a 4-Somewhat Disagree on the pre-test and a 2-Somewhat Agree on the post-test. A good change can also go in the opposite direction, for example: in response to the statement, “I am anxious about what CBE means for the future of higher education,” a good change would be moving from 1-Agree on the pre-test to 3-Neutral on the post-test.

Overall, the greatest change from pre- to post-test was in the area of general knowledge about CBE—the greatest proportion of participants moved along the scale from the disagree to the agree side on general CBE knowledge than for any other topic. There were many trainees who also saw “good change” in their views of the value of CBE and their personal opinions about CBE, but the ratings suggest that the impact of the training in these areas was not as widespread.

**Table 1. Average survey scores for all participants**

	Pre	Post	Difference	% "Good" Change
I can define competency-based education (CBE).	2.02	1.26	0.76	57.2%
I believe CBE is a valid pedagogical method.	1.71	1.43	0.28	32.9%
I am interested in being part of a CBE program at my institution.	1.57	1.49	0.08	19.8%
CBE programs can improve perceptions about the quality of a college degree.	2.07	1.90	0.16	33.6%
I can name three methods of competency-based assessment.	3.06	1.70	1.35	70.5%
I believe a CBE program will make my job harder.	3.14	2.62	-0.52	19.8%
I believe CBE can work for certain students.	1.69	1.36	0.33	31.3%
I would recommend CBE programs to students.	1.93	1.76	0.18	32.7%
I am anxious about what CBE and CBA mean for the future of education.	2.60	2.41	-0.19	27.4%
I understand the need to consider a CBE program at my institution.	1.58	1.51	0.07	24.2%
We already do competency-based assessment; we don't necessarily call it that.	2.51	2.04	0.46	49.5%
I am familiar with the differences among types of CBE programs.	3.14	1.55	1.59	80.5%
I understand the relationship between learning outcomes and competencies.	2.18	1.44	0.74	52.0%
I am interested in learning more about CBE programs.	1.37	1.45	0.08	16.1%
I believe a CBE model can reduce the cost of a college education.	1.92	1.76	0.16	33.6%
I understand the connection between prior learning assessment and CBE.	1.99	1.32	-0.67	50.7%
I think CBE can be helpful for higher education to create stronger connections with employers.	1.71	1.36	0.35	35.3%
This workshop gave me new information about CBE programs.		1.14		
This workshop answered most of my questions about CBE programs.		1.65		
The facilitator had good command of the content.		1.13		
The facilitator presented the information in a way that was easy to understand.		1.16		
I learned a lot in this workshop.		1.29		

*\*Negatively stated questions reverse scored for "Difference." All negative differences signify "bad" change in score.*





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