

# City University of Seattle (CityU): Performance-Based Degree Model

## A competency-based education case study

*This case study is part of a series on newer competency-based degree programs that have been emerging in recent years. The case studies are prepared by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) with funding from Lumina Foundation.*

### PERFORMANCE-BASED DEGREES AT SEATTLE CITY UNIVERSITY: AN OVERVIEW

Seattle City University (CityU) first began its endeavor with performance-based education 14 years ago in collaboration with the state of Washington through the development of a bachelor's-level, state certification program in K-12 teaching called the Alternative Route to Teacher Certification. In 2012, CityU launched two additional performance-based degree programs: a Master's in Education (MEd) and a Master's in Teaching (MIT). All of CityU's performance-based programs currently offered to the public are in the field of K-12 education, and the programs' primary target audience is professionals who are currently working in the field.

The online, self-paced courses—or *learning blocks*—in CityU's performance-based programs are designed around a set of competencies. Candidates in these programs are assessed on their mastery of these competencies and state requirements through the evaluation of artifacts that they choose to submit from their own teaching practice. The completion of each learning block results in credit hours required for completion of the degree program. Each learning block has a designated faculty facilitator and third-party assessor. With a maximum number of 25 students per learning block, CityU's performance-based programs emphasize individualized, one-on-one attention from faculty as well as opportunities for peer-to-peer collaboration.

### CITYU PERFORMANCE-BASED SNAPSHOT

- Two master's-level programs and one bachelor's-level state certification program, which are all in the field of K-12 education
- Online, self-paced courses (or *learning blocks*) offered for enrollment on five-week terms
- Faculty members serve as the *facilitator* and *assessor* in each learning block
- Learning blocks have three sections: knowledge, skills, and abilities
- Knowledge assessments are in the form of multiple choice and short answer exams; whereas skills and abilities are assessed using artifacts from professional practice
- Competencies were developed using a framework of existing course and program outcomes, with input from a team of education officials and employers

### BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Founded in 1973, CityU is a private, nonprofit university accredited through the doctoral level. CityU has a flagship campus and headquarters in Seattle, Washington, and it offers over 60 degree and certificate programs available in 28 sites around the world. Its academic programs are offered through three schools and two divisions. Total enrollment is around 2,500 students annually.

## WHAT IS COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION?

In recent years, a number of postsecondary institutions have developed new competency-based degree programs. These programs are promising for the future of higher education because they establish clear expectations for what graduates must know and be able to do, and many models are self-paced. The emphasis on learning acquired rather than seat time is particularly important for adult and nontraditional learners who bring learning from their work and life experiences to higher education. Competency-based models allow students to build on what they already know to obtain a post-secondary credential at their own pace.

CityU was founded on a clear principle of advancing opportunities for anyone with a desire to learn, and it has a strong focus on serving the working adult and transfer student. The university offers flexible online and on-site programs, three of which are performance based. Performance-based education is, in many ways, synonymous with competency-based education (CBE).

Fourteen years ago, CityU began developing the foundation for its performance-based education model as a result of both internal and external influences. At that time, the state of Washington was beginning to focus on the need to increase opportunities for professionals already working in K-12 education—for instance, as paraprofessionals or classroom aides—to gain teaching credentials. Since most of these individuals already had significant professional classroom experience, CityU wanted to offer a program that would leverage their learning from the experience already gained within the field of education.

In partnership with the state of Washington, CityU developed a performance-based program called the Alternative Route to Teacher Certification. The program allows students to submit artifacts from their actual teaching practice through a year-long mentored apprenticeship to demonstrate their mastery of the state-identified competencies required for official certification. Since its inception, the Alternative Route track has helped around 200 students earn their teaching certification.

In 2012, CityU developed two performance-based programs: MEd, which offers concentrations in curriculum and instruction, technology, autism, special education, and reading and literacy; and MIT, which offers concentrations in special education and elementary education. Beginning in summer 2015, an Alternative Route MIT program will launch, providing another avenue for teacher certification and degree completion. The MIT program has graduated 9 students thus far with another 4 in June 2015, and the MEd program has 11 students on track for graduation in June 2015.

The development and continued expansion and modification of the MEd and MIT degree programs, on which the remainder of this case study will focus, have helped CityU to refine and more fully establish its current performance-based model.

### CITYU PERFORMANCE-BASED PROGRAMS

- **Alternative Route to Teaching Certification.** This Teaching Certification program enables K-12 employees, such as classroom aides and paraprofessionals, to obtain teacher certification.
- **Master's in Education (MEd).** The target population for this program is teachers who already have an undergraduate teaching degree but would like to get a master's, which is encouraged for educators in the state of Washington.
- **Master's in Teaching (MIT).** This program is directed toward people who have an undergraduate degree in an area other than teaching K-12 education.

## DEVELOPING PROGRAMS AND IDENTIFYING COMPETENCIES

The CityU's performance-based MEd and MIT programs each evolved from existing, traditionally structured degree programs. The program development effort was spearheaded by Dr. Kristin Jones, Director of CityU's Performance-Based Education Programs, along with a team of faculty and staff members. In addition to the internal team, CityU individually consulted a number of external stakeholders, including state education officials and employers—i.e., school districts in the Seattle metro-area who employ graduates of teaching programs. Particularly because CityU's performance-based programs are within the field of K-12 teaching, it was critical during the development process to ensure that all state requirements for teacher certification and advancement were being fully met as well as the workforce needs of school districts within the state.

The first stage in the development process was to identify the appropriate competencies that each course, or learning block, within the degree program should cover. CityU's curriculum was already designed to be outcomes based, resulting from more than a decade of work by faculty to identify institution-wide learning goals (see sidebar) as well as to map the curriculum to student learning outcomes. CityU courses all had well-defined learning outcomes as well as grading rubrics, which provided a helpful framework and starting point for identifying the learning block competencies that described not only what students were expected to know but also how they were expected to be able to apply that learning in a classroom setting.

Even though there were learning outcomes defined for the traditional course curricula, the idea of identifying and defining competencies was new to faculty and staff members. As a way to help clarify the concept, the team used Bloom's Taxonomy, which is a framework for classifying statements of "what we expect or intend students to learn as a result of instruction" (Krathwohl, 2002, p. 1). The taxonomy defines different levels of learning, with lower levels defined as *knowledge* and *comprehension* and higher levels as *application*, *analysis*, *synthesis*, and

## DEFINITIONS

- Each course within CityU's performance-based programs covers one content area or major theme; they are called *learning blocks*.
- Students that participate in performance-based programs are referred to as *candidates*. This title distinguishes them from their own students, since nearly all candidates are teaching in the field and using their work with students to demonstrate their competencies.

*evaluation*. Using the taxonomy, Jones and her team guided faculty members through the process of defining the expected learning outcomes to go beyond the learning and comprehension levels and to include more from the application level and higher. It was important throughout the development process for clear statements to be created identifying what candidates need to demonstrate as a result of their learning.

These efforts produced clear definitions of expected competencies for each learning block, ranging from three to eight competencies per block. All of the competencies are aligned with the overall program outcomes and institutional learning goals (see Figure 1). Certain competencies also map back to state requirements for various teaching endorsements that may be embedded within the curricula.

## CITY UNIVERSITY OF SEATTLE LEARNING GOALS

### *Abbreviated*

- CityU graduates exhibit professional competency and a sense of professional identity.
- CityU graduates have strong communication and interpersonal skills.
- CityU graduates demonstrate critical thinking and information literacy.
- CityU graduates demonstrate a strong commitment to ethical practice and service in their professions and communities.
- CityU graduates demonstrate diverse and global perspectives.
- CityU graduates are lifelong learners.

# CITY UNIVERSITY OF SEATTLE COMPETENCY MAPPING

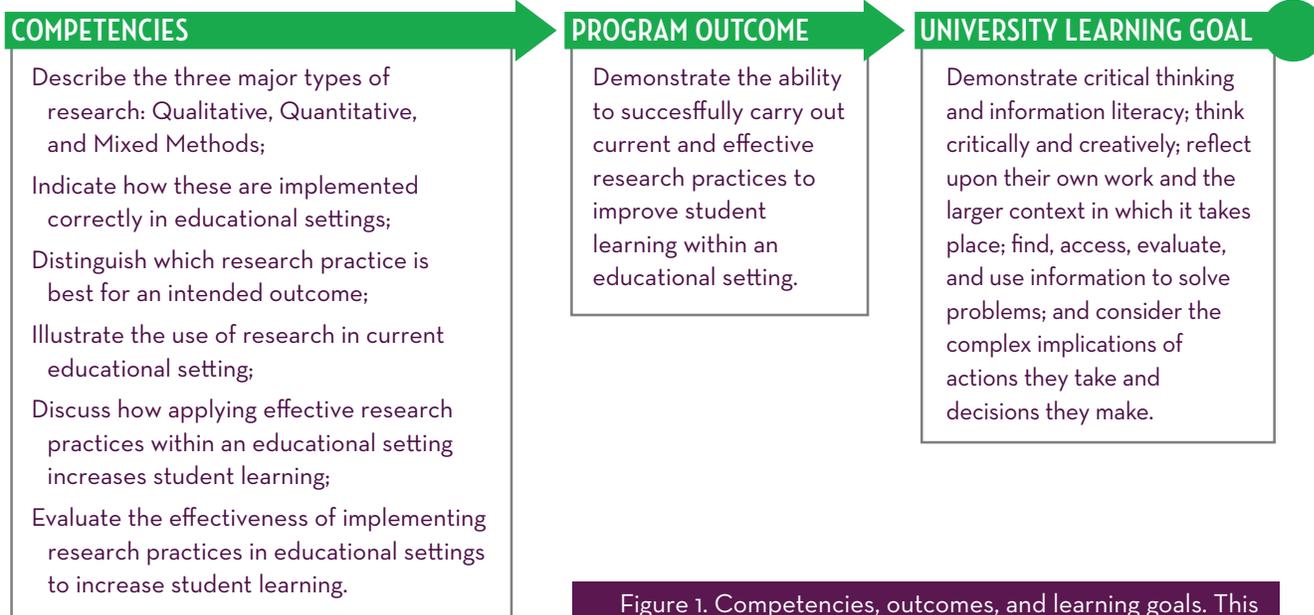


Figure 1. Competencies, outcomes, and learning goals. This figure illustrates how program competencies were mapped with program outcomes and CityU learning goals.

## CURRICULUM AND ASSESSMENT

The learning activities within CityU's performance-based programs are delivered through a designated sequence of online learning blocks, which were designed and developed by the internal program development team. Upon enrolling in each of the MEd learning blocks, *candidates*—the term used for students enrolled in CityU's performance-based programs—complete a self-assessment of their own familiarity with and/or mastery of the specific competencies covered in the learning block. This exercise allows them to identify their strengths as well as the areas where they will need to spend the most time and focus during the learning block.

Candidates in both the MEd and MIT programs create an individualized learning timeline that outlines how much time they expect they will need to spend on each of the various topics covered in the learning block. The expectation is that the candidates will take around 10 weeks to complete a learning block, but candidates are permitted to take anywhere from 5 to 22 weeks, which provides great flexibility to working learners. They are given a sample 10-week timeline to use as a guide.

Candidates discuss and modify their proposed learning timelines in collaboration with their *facilitator*. The facilitator is a faculty member assigned to each learning block who provides support to candidates throughout the block. The facilitator provides periodic guidance and feedback. Although learning timelines can be adapted anytime as needed, facilitators have at least weekly individual check-ins with the candidates to discuss their progress. These check-ins also offer opportunities for candidates to reflect, in collaboration with their facilitator, on how their new learning applies to their individual professional contexts.

Since candidates are able to individualize their time spent in each learning block within a 5 to 22 week range, the performance-based programs do not operate on a traditional semester-based schedule. New learning blocks are offered on a regular schedule, typically every five weeks. MIT candidates are permitted to participate in two learning blocks simultaneously and MEd candidates are usually limited to one block per term.

Learning blocks are open to a maximum of 25 candidates. If more than 25 candidates enroll in a learning block during the same term, it is split into multiple groups. For example, if 30

candidates enroll in a particular learning block, it will be divided into two smaller groups of 15 candidates each. Careful consideration is given to the design of each learning block in order to provide opportunities for peer learning and support, as described later in the case study.

Each online learning block covers a single content area or theme, which is developed through three main strands, or folders: knowledge, skills, and ability to perform. In each of these strands, candidates are provided numerous learning resources that will help them demonstrate their mastery. First, they must demonstrate their mastery of the theoretical knowledge in the content area. Then, they must show that they are competent in the various skills involved in the content area. Finally, candidates are asked to show that they are able to successfully apply those practices and strategies in a current classroom setting. Traditionally formatted online tests are used to assess basic knowledge, while intensive rubrics are used to score candidates' artifacts and their individualized demonstrations of skills and abilities mastery (see Table 1).

- **Folder 1: Knowledge.** The first folder in a learning block contains reading material and other learning content that candidates can engage with in order to gain mastery over the *knowledge* required for that content area. When candidates have mastered the content covered, they proceed to the assessment stage and demonstrate knowledge of the block content.

The MEd knowledge tests were individually developed by an internal team of faculty and subject matter experts based on the specific content and competencies. They cover material that includes terminology, theory, and the historical perspective about changes in particular educational practices over time. The tests are primarily in the form of multiple choice and/or short answer questions and are proctored through the Learning Management System (LMS). Facilitators review any open-ended short answer questions and score them according to a rubric that lists the knowledge-based competencies

covered in this folder of the learning block. Once candidates satisfactorily pass this test, the next folder in the learning block becomes accessible in the LMS.

- **Folder 2: Skills.** The second learning block folder contains materials about the *skills* in the particular content area. The materials focus on the impact and importance of the content covered in this learning block, as well as on the different methodologies and perspectives for implementation in the field. Candidates are prompted to examine the connections between the content area and classroom practice, and then reflect on the ways in which the best practices described align with their own experiences in the field. After candidates have mastered this folder's content, they proceed to the assessment stage.

For the assessment, candidates must submit one or more artifacts that demonstrate their mastery of the skills within the content area and their ability to make connections to their current or future practice. Artifacts are then scored by the learning block assessor, a third-party faculty member whose sole role in the learning block is to assess candidate submissions and provide extensive feedback.

- **Folder 3: Ability.** Candidates who are scored as competent in all rubric areas of the skills folder are then able to access the final folder of the learning block, which prompts them to select at least one practice or strategy from the content area and submit one or more artifacts that demonstrate their ability to apply the new learning in that content area. Artifacts must show that the candidate has synthesized her or his learning and assessed the effectiveness of the learned strategies within classroom teaching practice. The assessor then scores the artifacts, and candidates whose final artifacts are scored as competent in each of the performance rubric areas are considered to have completed the learning block and are permitted to move on to the next learning block in the program.

Table 1. Chart for Demonstrating Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities

There are three main facets of competency-based education in which students must demonstrate the ability to meet the standards set for each facet. These facets are knowledge, skills, and ability to perform.

| KNOWLEDGE   | SKILLS  | ABILITY  |
|---|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vocabulary</li> <li>• Theories</li> <li>• Historical information</li> </ul> <p>Demonstration:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Test method</li> <li>• Written paper</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Synthesize research</li> <li>• Determine best practices</li> <li>• Identify and develop plan of action</li> <li>• Research-based support</li> </ul> <p>Demonstration:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Research reports</li> <li>• Videos</li> <li>• Lesson plans</li> <li>• Portfolio of artifacts</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Implement new learning in classroom setting</li> <li>• Gather data on effectiveness</li> <li>• Analyze results</li> <li>• Reflect on process and determine next steps</li> </ul> <p>Demonstration:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Videos</li> <li>• Lesson plans</li> <li>• Presentations</li> <li>• Student work samples</li> <li>• Portfolios</li> <li>• Leading on-site trainings</li> </ul> |

Candidate artifacts for the skills and abilities portions of each learning block can be any item that the candidate believes will best demonstrate his or her competency. As shown through the examples listed in Table 1, this allows for a wide range of creative submissions, such as student classroom work, videos of live lectures, lesson plans, other teaching materials, and candidate-created websites. This flexibility allows candidates to integrate their learning directly into their teaching practice by contextualizing the material in their experiences and customizing it to their work environments. Facilitators are required to review at least one draft of each artifact before it is submitted to the assessor.

Rubrics for assessing candidate artifacts typically have between three and five indicators of competency. In order for an artifact to be assessed to show competence, candidates must meet each indicator on the rubric. CityU emphasizes the importance of ensuring that graduates are competent in each area of content.

## ROLE OF FACULTY

One of the primary differences between competency-based and traditional instruction-based models is the role of faculty. Within these programs, faculty members do not typically perform traditional instruction activities, but rather take on a role that is more of a coach or facilitator of learning.

CityU's performance-based model utilizes two faculty members per learning block to perform the following distinct roles, as mentioned previously:

- *Facilitators* provide support to candidates as they progress through their learning block, providing periodic guidance and feedback.
- *Assessors*, as the name suggests, are singularly responsible for assessing student submissions for the skills and abilities strands. The assessors evaluate whether the candidate demonstrated proficiency using prescribed rubrics.

In addition to being trained on the performance-based model's competencies, rubrics, and methodologies, all faculty members within these programs are experienced professional educators in the field. They are each capable of performing both roles of facilitator and assessor and will often switch their roles from term to term.

## PEER COLLABORATION AND LEARNING

Since learning blocks are only available to up to 25 candidates, these programs offer a number of opportunities for collaboration with facilitators, as well as among other candidates in that learning block. As noted previously, check-ins with facilitators on at least a weekly basis provide a significant level of one-on-one time for guidance from faculty. Additionally, for each learning block there is a large group discussion forum available in the LMS for all enrolled candidates to collaborate with each other on the learning block as a whole. Facilitators also establish smaller groups of candidates who are completing the learning block at a similar pace, which fosters collaboration on more specific materials or concepts. Facilitators encourage candidates to actively participate in each of these two types of discussion forums as they progress through the block. Candidates are also encouraged to share their work with each other and provide peer-to-peer feedback on artifacts prior to submission to the facilitator or assessor.

## THE CREDIT HOUR AND ACCREDITATION

The CityU performance-based model is structured to allow as much flexibility as possible while still adhering to the regional accreditation constraints, particularly with regard to ensuring access to financial aid. In order for accredited postsecondary programs to become entirely competency based and no longer tied to the traditional credit hour, the institution needs to apply to the U.S. Department of Education to be designated as a direct assessment program. The

U.S. Department of Education defines a direct assessment program as “an instructional program that, in lieu of credit hours or clock hours as a measure of student learning, utilizes direct assessment of student learning, or recognizes the direct assessment of student learning by others” (Department of Education, 2014). CityU's accreditor is the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU). Programs seeking to be designated under this classification must undergo what is referred to as a substantive change accreditation process in order to be eligible for financial aid coverage (Northwest Commission on Colleges and Schools, 2013).

Currently CityU is in the process of developing a direct assessment option; the current performance-based programs are based on the credit hour. This structure ensures that candidates in performance-based programs are eligible for federal financial aid, which was an important consideration for the design team. Each learning block is equivalent to a certain number of credits. For example, most MIT blocks are equivalent to between one and three credits, and many MEd blocks are equivalent to six.

## PROGRAM CANDIDATES AND THEIR ORIENTATION TO THE PROGRAM

Although diverse in many ways, such as race and ethnicity, the candidates in CityU's performance-based programs have a number of characteristics in common. Many candidates in the program are teachers or K-12 professionals who are already working in the classroom in some capacity. Another notable commonality is that candidates in both the MEd and MIT programs are primarily female (a reflection of the persistent gender disparity in the teaching profession nationally).

According to a presentation during the 2014 CAEL Conference delivered by Steve Brown, Program Director of CityU's MIT program, and Craig Scheiber, Dean of CityU's School of Education, the ideal candidate is self-directed, resourceful, highly motivated, innovative, and flexible. Program leaders agree that successful candidates need to be strong in critical thinking, communication, stamina, time management, and professionalism.

In order to make sure that candidates will be as successful as possible, CityU employs both preemptive screening strategies as well as some training to orient new candidates into the programs. During the application stage, each prospective candidate goes through an interview process in which they are asked questions about their work life and commitments outside of the program as well as questions about their learning style and preferences, such as, “Would you prefer to be told what to read each week, or would you prefer to determine your own reading each week?” The interview helps to identify those applicants who possess the personal qualities needed to thrive in the flexible performance-based model.

Additionally, CityU offers some resources that are designed help new candidates acclimate to the performance-based learning model. For example, for the MIT program, there are informational meetings and materials shared with prospective candidates prior to their enrollment as well as a mandatory in-person orientation session upon their acceptance into the program. All candidates have access to a collection of information about the performance-based model, available through the LMS. The MIT program’s director, who leads the program’s operations and played a key role in its development, always serves as the facilitator for the first learning block in the program. This helps new candidates become accustomed to the structure by providing one-on-one access to a facilitator who is a subject matter expert not only on the content area of the learning block but also on the performance-based model.

## OUTREACH

In order to market these programs to prospective students, CityU utilizes a number of partnership channels. About two years ago, CityU became an affiliate of the National University System (National University, 2013), which has provided an increased level of resources for marketing and outreach. A partnership with a recruitment company called MindStream has also increased capacity for marketing these performance-based programs.

Past and current students in CityU’s performance-based programs have been almost exclusively from the greater Seattle area in Washington state, but as a result of these efforts to ramp up outreach, CityU is now seeing a significant increase in inquiries and applications from across the nation. The team is currently working on navigating the various state requirements for teaching certification and advancement to ensure that the programs will meet the needs of potential incoming students from different states.

CityU also has partnerships with multiple school districts and community colleges within the state that often refer their employees to CityU for further training and credentialing. Additionally, CityU advisors do significant outreach work in communities throughout Washington state to publicize the programs.

## COST AND PRICING/SUSTAINABILITY

In developing their performance-based programs, CityU did not receive any outside funding. Jones, who came to CityU with extensive curriculum development experience, was able to lead the effort of developing the competency framework and learning block system for the MEd programs with assistance from a small internal team at no additional cost to the university beyond the team members’ salaried time. Jones emphasizes that CityU’s development of this model in the absence of external funding shows how institutions that are interested in exploring CBE models need not feel constrained if they are unable to secure grant funds to support the development effort. As director of performance-based programs, one of Jones’s primary job functions is to continue developing and expanding the model.

The learning blocks in the performance-based programs are credit based and are priced at the institutional rate of \$473 per credit hour. Offering these programs at the university’s standard pricing level provides sufficient revenue for CityU to sustain all the costs to deliver the program, which include the time of facilitators, assessors, and Jones as the director. Since pricing is based

per credit hour and not on a subscription model like some CBE programs, candidates may progress more quickly, but they don't realize cost savings in these programs.

## LESSONS LEARNED AND THE FUTURE OF THE MODEL

The pioneers in any field of innovation are often tasked with addressing challenges that emerge through trial and error. Such is also the case within the emerging field of competency-based education. One of the key lessons learned by CityU as it has implemented this model is that performance-based programs are individualized, not independent, and need to provide ample amounts of guidance and support to the student. One of the ways that CityU has addressed this challenge is by using a scaffolding approach so that candidates start with the lower level knowledge component in the learning block structure and then gradually work their way up to the more challenging skill and ability assessments. By verifying that candidates have mastered foundational knowledge as a required first step, it ensures that they will be better prepared to take on the later portions of the block. CityU also builds in frequent check-ins between candidates and their facilitators, which help candidates stick to their proposed timelines. CityU intends to continue exploring how best to support candidates and help address any challenges they may be experiencing.

In addition to adding more opportunities for check-ins between candidates and faculty facilitators, CityU is working on developing several other performance-based programs. In the past year, CityU has contracted with Boeing Corporation to design a Bachelor's in Management degree program, which incorporates elements of the performance-based model. Although for the time being this program is offered exclusively for Boeing employees and is contextualized within the particular needs of the corporation, CityU is working on developing a

public version of the program and will open this for enrollment summer quarter 2015.

In addition to the Bachelor's in Management program, CityU is working on developing two other performance-based programs, a Master's in Adult Education and a Bachelor's in Information Technology.

## CONCLUSION

City University of Seattle has developed a performance-based degree program model that makes a valuable contribution to the rapidly growing field of competency-based education. Aspects of the CityU model, such as its emphasis on individualized attention and flexibility, make these programs an ideal option for teaching professionals who are looking to gain a credential in a way that acknowledges and builds upon their professional experience while giving an opportunity to simultaneously learn and apply new expertise.

The high level of one-on-one consultation time with faculty, who are all experienced K-12 professionals, is a unique feature of this program in the context of CBE as well as postsecondary education as a whole. With learning blocks limited to 25 candidates, these programs offer many opportunities for small-group collaboration and individualization. According to Jones, the balance between the self-directed nature of the programs and their numerous opportunities for peer and faculty consultation allows the program to be individualized without the candidates feeling isolated. The flexible learning timeline also allows professionals to balance their work and other responsibilities in order to progress through the program at a pace that works for them.

CityU's plans to continue expanding and advancing their model through improvements to the overall structure, as well as the addition of three new performance-based programs (MEd in Adult Education, BA in Information Technology, and BA in Management), will further its impact on the CBE field.

## Acknowledgements

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