In Fall 2020, amid the ongoing COVID-19 transitions, American Institutes for Research surveyed colleges and universities across the United States to better understand their interest in and adoption of competency-based education (CBE).

This survey—the third in a series of three—indicates that, despite major disruptions to institutional operations, CBE programs are growing and institutions are optimistic about continued growth. In some cases, the need to shift operations due to the pandemic appears to have increased institutions’ interest in CBE.

Of the 488 institutions that responded ...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Have full CBE programs</th>
<th>13%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Are in the process of adopting</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are interested in adopting</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have no interest</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Over 3 years of the survey, 128 institutions with full CBE programs reported a total of:

- 851 undergraduate programs
- 206 graduate programs

In the last academic year ...

- 33% programs had fewer than 50 students enrolled
- 33% programs had between 51–499 students enrolled
- 33% programs had more than 500 students enrolled

Equity: How do students in CBE programs compare to students in traditional programs?

CBE student populations were similar to those in traditional programs in terms of race/ethnicity and Pell status, but CBE programs had larger shares of students with prior credit and adult students (ages 25 and older).

The Most Common Undergraduate Disciplines

1. Nursing/Health Professions
2. Business Administration
3. Computer and Information Science

1 To capture the diversity of CBE programs, we defined these as entire programs of study typified by at least one of the following: learning is measured in competencies; students advance between courses or complete the program based on mastering all required competencies; or courses or programs offer students flexible pacing.

This survey builds on 2016 and 2017 Deconstructing CBE reports (conducted by Eduventures® Research) and the 2018 & 2019 National Survey of Postsecondary CBE reports.
“Our CBE enrollment is booming. CBE seems less radical to many who previously opposed it now that we all live in the digital realm. They are more open to development, and multiple new courses are in development as a result.”

Over half of institutions said the COVID-19 pandemic affected their institution’s motivation to adopt or expand CBE.

**Top factor:** perceiving a long-term shift happening in the higher education landscape.

**Other key factors:**
- CBE models could help institutions respond to future disruptions or uncertainties.
- Campuses gained experience with an online or hybrid approach.

For those interested but not adopting, another top barrier was on-campus expertise for developing CBE programs.

### Institutions perceive substantial internal and external barriers to CBE implementation.

For institutions with existing programs or those that are in the process of implementing programs, **perceived barriers included**:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Business Systems and Processes</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federal Student Aid</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program Start Up Cost</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Priority Initiatives</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For those interested but not adopting, another top barrier was on-campus expertise for developing CBE programs.

### Future of CBE

Despite barriers and disruptions, institutions are optimistic about the future of CBE.

Of those with CBE programs:
- 82% said they expect the number of CBE programs nationally to grow in the next 5 years.
- 64% said they plan to increase the number of CBE programs at their institution.
- 34% expected the number will stay the same.

What are institutions’ most common motivations for adopting CBE?

For institutions interested in adoption but not yet adopting, their most common motivations include viewing CBE as a:
- desire to expand access for nontraditional learners (67%)
- response to workforce needs (59%)
- desire to improve learning outcomes (56%).