

Change Management in Postsecondary Competency-Based Education Program Implementation: **Lessons From the Field**

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Competency-based education (CBE) is more than a new course or program modality; for many postsecondary institutions, it's a completely new way of doing business. Institutions face common barriers to implementation, like integrating CBE into institutional systems and business processes, lack of buy-in from faculty and staff, adjusting teaching and learning to fit CBE, or dealing with external policies and regulatory frameworks like accreditation or federal financial aid policy.

OUR RESEARCH

As part of ongoing research into the effectiveness of postsecondary CBE programs, researchers from the American Institutes for Research® (AIR®) interviewed program leaders from five institutions about their experiences implementing CBE. The implementation journeys these leaders shared point to the importance of *change management*—a structured approach to guiding people and organizations through transitions—in mitigating these common implementation barriers.

In this piece, we draw on five core strategies for institutional transformation to illustrate the importance of change management in establishing CBE programs, which requires institutions to make fundamental changes to how they do business and rethink their approaches to teaching and learning.

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With funding from Ascendium Education Group, AIR is partnering with the postsecondary CBE community nationally to share best practices and lessons learned about implementing these programs. To achieve this goal, AIR is collecting enrollment and outcome data and conducting a rigorous quasi-experimental study to assess CBE's impact on student success. For more information about the study and AIR's research on postsecondary CBE, please visit <http://www.air.org/postsec-cbe>.

WHAT IS CBE?

Postsecondary CBE is a learner-centered model that grounds learning and program completion in demonstration of measurable competencies rather than in grades or credit hours. CBE programs combine an intentional, transparent curriculum approach that maps key competencies and requirements for progression with an academic model that holds learning expectations constant while allowing flexibility in time to program completion. Learners demonstrate mastery through multiple forms of authentic, performance-based assessments to earn program credentials. Varied definitions of CBE exist, but CBE programs generally include three common features: (a) curricula designed around specific competencies, (b) advancement through the program based on demonstration of competency, and (c) flexibility in the time learners take to demonstrate a competency (Mason et al., 2021).

FIVE CORE STRATEGIES FOR INSTITUTIONAL TRANSFORMATION

Research on institutional transformation offers a practical roadmap for navigating change in higher education, emphasizing the importance of going beyond developing new structures toward creating opportunities for people involved to think differently about their work and redefine their roles as institutional culture shifts. Eckel and Kezar's (2003) core strategies for change "provide institutions with multiple opportunities for key participants to create new understandings of the institution's direction and priorities, of their roles in the transforming institution, and of the ways common notions—such as teaching, service, participation—are evolving and what they now mean." These strategies are as follows:

- 1. Senior Administrative Support:** Visible commitment from top leadership signals that change is a priority by legitimizing the work and ensuring resources and vision are aligned.
- 2. Collaborative Leadership:** Cross-functional teams, steering committees, and faculty champions create shared ownership and help break down silos, and collaboration builds trust and buy-in across the institution.
- 3. Flexible Vision:** A flexible guiding vision drives change and enables institutions to adapt as changes are implemented and conditions shift.
- 4. Visible Action:** Pilots, phased rollouts, and early wins demonstrate that change is real and achievable, which builds momentum and confidence across the institution.
- 5. Staff Development:** Investing in professional development through training, coaching, and technology support helps faculty and staff succeed in new models and sustain innovation over time.

These strategies emerged throughout the stories institutions shared about implementing CBE. In the sections that follow, we explore how they supported CBE implementation in practice.

Core Strategy 1: Senior Administrative Support

Eckel and Kezar's (2003) research emphasizes that visible commitment from senior leaders is key to successful institutional transformation. Executive sponsorship legitimizes the effort, secures resources, and helps overcome resistance by framing CBE as part of the institution's strategy and priorities. Our interviews echoed this point repeatedly. As one program leader put it:

Building a CBE program is not a course development project. It is building a college within a college. ... You also need an executive sponsor. If there is not somebody sitting at the top saying, "This is important to our institution and we're going to make it work," it won't work.

Senior leaders also demonstrated their support by engaging directly with program development. For example, at one institution, the president, who was deeply involved in the planning and launch of the CBE program, continues to teach and design at least one CBE course each semester and recently worked with humanities faculty to launch a new CBE program at the institution.

Core Strategy 2: Collaborative Leadership

Senior leaders who champion CBE send a clear message that this is an institutional priority, but top-down support alone is insufficient. Institution staff we interviewed consistently shared how distributed leadership and collaborative approaches to planning and implementation helped them mitigate barriers, especially related to buy-in.

To create opportunities for education and personal investment, institutions formed steering committees and cross-functional teams, bringing together staff from across academic and business units. One program leader described how they prioritized regular meetings and transparent communication during program launch to ensure all staff involved were engaged throughout the process. Faculty as well as staff from student services, institutional research (IR), financial aid, registrar, information technology (IT), and marketing participated in these meetings and discussed how CBE programs would impact their work. "We needed to get essentially everybody that would be affected at the table to talk about the strategy for this program," one person explained. Another program leader described a collaborative campus culture that supports cross-campus collaboration and decision making on an ongoing basis: "We really are in each other's business a lot. ... It's just the way we work here collectively." Leaders at the institution support "larger scale college meetings" that happen biweekly and allow staff from all departments to flag upcoming changes and challenges. They also host monthly meetings focused on academic updates that all staff are free to join.

Eckel and Kezar (2003) argue that collaborative leadership creates opportunities for people to “see themselves” in the change. Understanding that lack of buy-in is a key barrier to successful implementation, institutions used storytelling, data, and direct engagement to help faculty and staff understand what CBE meant for their roles and priorities. They also leveraged the support of champions across campus in telling those stories. A senior leader described looking for “faculty that were willing to take a leap of faith”:

This transition was so mind blowing to many college employees, faculty and staff alike, that we needed some early adopters who were willing to just take a chance on this and just trust in us that we are going to go on this journey together. If we fail, we fail together and we'll return to the way we used to do things. If not, what a cool thing you have just done to be this kind of pioneer.

Core Strategy 3: Flexible Vision

The implementation journeys these institutions shared highlighted the iterative and changing nature of CBE implementation. Eckel and Kezar’s (2003) “flexible vision” strategy calls for “a flexible plan with a clear sense of direction” that provides a strong guiding vision and is adaptable enough to respond to both internal and external challenges as they arise. Especially for institutions implementing an innovative model like CBE, a flexible vision that can adapt to factors such as federal and state regulations, faculty contracts, and student needs was key. As one program leader put it: “There’s not one way to do this. ... People have to be OK with the gray area.”

A common example of how institutions have had to adapt is addressing faculty workload and compensation. Running CBE courses with low enrollment, managing rolling start dates, and supporting self-paced learners required institutions to negotiate faculty compensation and workload agreements. One program leader shared the experience of rethinking the faculty pay structure as enrollment grew; they moved from lower levels of compensation (e.g., independent study compensation) for faculty teaching low-enrollment courses to higher levels of compensation associated with full faculty pay. The program leader described this as “a huge win for pay equality and also ... encouraging faculty to be a teacher in this program.”

This flexible, adaptable vision is important beyond program launch because institutional transformation is an ongoing process. Institutions described how their CBE programs are integrated into ongoing operations through regular program reviews and continuous improvement plans. They use tools and strategies such as dashboards, student surveys, and advisory boards to monitor outcomes and make data-driven changes. A program leader at one institution described how they use dashboards to support continuous improvement and adaptation:

We have some data analytics dashboards that have been built by our research analytics and reporting team, and that really helps us determine not only how courses are doing, but also ... that course might need to be updated sooner rather than later because it is kind of falling behind on the completion rate. So we use that for how students are doing, but also how the courses are doing and then using it for enrollment purposes. What courses have higher enrollment? Everything comes back to data at the end of the day. The data tells the story.

Core Strategy 4: Visible Action

Eckel and Kezar (2003) emphasize that visible action, like early wins, tangible action steps, and clear progress, helps build momentum and trust during transformation. Institution leaders we interviewed learned that gradual implementation helps maintain quality and avoid overwhelming staff.

Pilots and phased rollouts gave teams space to refine processes, troubleshoot pain points, and build confidence before expanding. One program leader described how gradual rollout is important for sustainability, noting that with such a “huge investment in staff time and resources,” starting small by piloting one or two programs and observing results is key: “It’s something that again should be taken in steps and something that just really makes sense for the sustainability of the college too.”

Continuous feedback loops also were important for institutions because they ensured that lessons from early adopters informed the next wave of implementation. For example, at one institution, early pilots revealed that students were struggling with time management in self-paced courses. Rather than scaling immediately, the team analyzed completion data and surveyed students to understand pain points. Based on that feedback, they introduced milestone check-ins and automated progress alerts in the learning management system (LMS) before expanding the model to additional programs.

Core Strategy 5: Staff Development

Staff development as a core strategy helps to build faculty and staff knowledge and skills that enable them to feel more confident about building and working in CBE programs. For our institutions, this often looked like a focus on faculty training and technology supports to help programs run more efficiently.

Institutions invested in helping faculty and staff understand CBE and shift from traditional teaching models to approaches centered on mastery and flexibility. Training sessions and workshops provided space for faculty to ask questions, troubleshoot challenges, and learn best practices for assessment and student engagement. One institution even developed faculty training modules that used competency-based principles, including pre-assessments that allowed faculty to “test out” of training modules. A program leader described the importance of this: “I think incorporating it not just in the program itself and making it applicable to their real-life experiences is really helpful.”

Institutions also leveraged technology infrastructure to manage complexity and help faculty and staff work more effectively in CBE programs, especially as programs grew. Dashboards, LMS templates, and automated registration scripts streamlined operations and gave staff up-to-date visibility into student progress. One program leader described the experience of moving from all manual processes to more automation:

When we started, everything was manual. ... Now when I think about running the CBE program, I think about all of the systems and structures that we’ve had to put into place in order to make this run smoothly. ... There are lots of things behind the scenes that are keeping us running.

They collaborated with IT to develop a system to automatically enroll students into appropriate courses in the LMS based on their course registrations and notify faculty when new students are joining courses. This notification was especially important because the program was designed to allow learners to enroll at multiple time points throughout the semester. They also worked with IR staff to develop a customized dashboard that “gives the [student success] coaches a snapshot of what all students on their caseload are doing in any given course” to support targeted outreach to students.

CONCLUSION

The stories shared by these institution leaders highlight the complexity of CBE implementation. As we describe in this brief, launching and implementing CBE programs goes beyond straightforward course or program development. CBE is an innovative approach to teaching and learning that varies across institutions as they make decisions about design features that fit their specific contexts, learners, and goals. Establishing and growing CBE programs are complex processes that require institutions to make substantial changes to the way they operate and the way they think about teaching and learning, making change management critical to successful implementation. Eckel and Kezar's (2003) five core strategies offer a practical framework for interpreting these implementation journeys and can help build the foundation for successfully launching and sustaining new CBE programs.

As part of AIR's full study, we dive deeper into these institutions' journeys, with the goal of understanding what worked well, where they encountered challenges and how they addressed them, and how these experiences affected the decisions they made about the design of their programs. For more information about the study, please visit our [project page](#).

REFERENCES

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