



Reinventing Health Care Credentials in a Pandemic:

A Competency-Based Education Case Study

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Introduction

The Potential of Competency-Based Education

The COVID-19 pandemic brought health care providers into the spotlight as public health and safety have become nationwide issues. The heroism and value of frontline health care workers have never been clearer. Even before COVID-19, health care faced persistent talent shortages, a root cause of which is traditional academic programs—prioritizing seat-time based classes where learning is a function of time spent earning credits toward a credential. Such approaches fail to accommodate the learning styles and life circumstances of significant numbers of prospective health care workers. Moreover, seat-time-based education shortchanges skill building because a student’s mastery of skills is not measured.

Competency-based education (CBE) focuses on student learning and the application of that learning—what they know and can do—rather than time spent in class. That focus on the most relevant skills for a role creates a proven pathway to deepen and diversify the health care talent pipeline. CBE emphasizes student learning and the application of that learning as a competency, defined as *“the capability to apply or use a set of related knowledge, skills, abilities, and intellectual behaviors, such as communication and problem-solving, to thrive in a defined career setting.”*¹ Each student’s progress is measured by demonstrating—through a system of rigorous assessments—the competence required for a focus area. In health care, CBE enables students to build on existing knowledge and skills to acquire the competencies employers need for in-demand roles. In 2020, as the pandemic spread nationwide, multiple states dropped time-bound measures of learning in health care professions to license competent people as quickly as possible.

At the forefront of CBE is the [Competency-Based Education Network \(C-BEN\)](#), the nation’s largest nonprofit organization devoted to expanding CBE. This case study shows how C-BEN’s consulting services helped the University of Massachusetts and Mass General Brigham develop a unique CBE-based offering for a hard-to-fill health profession role: the Practice Assistant.

¹ Competency-Based Education: A Clear, Equitable Path Forward for Today’s Learners



“C-BEN’s work with the participating organizations was instrumental in setting them up for success. They helped institutions learn and adhere to best practices for CBE while reinforcing the strategic value of engaging employers and health care workers in the development process. Additionally, C-BEN’s staff partnered with us quickly and effectively to adapt to remote-based support when the pandemic erupted.”

– Karen Shack, Senior Program Manager, Commonwealth Corporation

Executive Summary

How C-BEN, Mass General Brigham, UMass Online, and Commonwealth Corporation Developed the First-Ever Practice Assistant Credential

The case study demonstrates how a cross-sector partnership among C-BEN, the [Commonwealth Corporation](#), [Mass General Brigham](#) (Mass General Hospital and Brigham and Women's Hospital, or MGB, the largest private employer in Massachusetts); and the University of Massachusetts (UMass Online) assisted the grantees in building and launching an innovative CBE health profession credential. A credential to upskill existing workers, enhance economic mobility, and help health care providers tackle frontline staff shortages. Learn how this partnership:

- Leverages the course flexibility, affordability, and workforce alignment inherent to CBE
- Provides entry-level environmental and food service employees the upskilling necessary to move into an emerging and higher-paying frontline role—the practice assistant (PA)
- Collaborates with MGB to pinpoint the PA's performance behaviors to ensure the skills taught match job requirements
- Partners with UMass to offer an online Practice Assistant Certificate program—the first of its kind—tailored to the needs of working adults who often lack postsecondary credentials.

A Foundation in Best Practices—The Quality Framework

C-BEN's work on the course and program design for all three pilot programs was firmly rooted in rigor and quality. The consulting work followed a set of standards for establishing, measuring, and maintaining a CBE program—the Quality Framework for CBE Programs. The framework consists of the following eight Elements of Quality with accompanying standards that should be embedded in every CBE program:

- 1 Demonstrated institutional commitment to and capacity for competency-based innovation
- 2 Clear, measurable, meaningful, and integrated competencies
- 3 Coherent program and curriculum design
- 4 Credential-level assessment strategy with robust implementation
- 5 Intentionally designed and engaged learner experiences
- 6 Collaborative engagement with external partners
- 7 Transparency of student learning
- 8 Evidence-driven continuous improvement.

See C-BEN's [Quality Framework](#) for more information.

CBE and Health Care Credential Innovation in Massachusetts

Boosting Economic advancement: Massachusetts' Investment in Competency-Based Education

In 2018, Massachusetts Governor Charlie Baker established a Commission on Digital Innovation and Lifelong Learning ([DILL](#)) to increase access to skill-building educational opportunities for working adults whose work and family circumstances are not well served by conventional classroom-based college programs. In 2019, as part of this initiative, Commonwealth Corporation, a workforce development agency, brought together health care employers, higher education institutions, and training providers to pilot CBE programs. The pilots would “directly benefit diverse entry-level incumbent health care workers who could be candidates for high-demand, higher wage occupations if they had the appropriate skills and competencies.”

Commonwealth Corporation funded three CBE programs. It selected C-BEN to develop and support the launch of digital or hybrid competency-based programs in the first quarter of 2021. Commonwealth Corporation recognized that C-BEN's consulting team would ensure each program met the goals of three sets of stakeholders:

- **Health care employers**—reduce workforce shortages and skills gaps by upskilling existing workers
- **Employees**—acquire the skills required for the higher-paying roles available through their existing employers
- **Higher education institutions**—provide innovative academic offerings, enabling nontraditional students to acquire in-demand skills for employer partners

C-BEN's consultants worked with three higher education institutions to scope, structure, and implement their CBE programs. The range of institution types, modalities, and occupations involved attest to the power of CBE to improve career outcomes across diverse student populations.

CBE and Health Care Credential Innovation in Massachusetts (*cont.*)

The Need for a Practice Assistant Certificate Program

MGB focused on the PA position given the large number of vacancies throughout its system. Mass General Hospital had 150 annual vacancies and was expecting that to increase to 300 positions in the next two years due to forecasted needs of expanded practice. Brigham and Women's Hospital had 175 annual vacancies and forecasted that to grow to 350 positions in the next two years given the practice growth trajectory.

A PA provides customer service, oversees the completion of patient appointments, and carries out administrative duties. Because there are currently no specific higher education programs to train PAs, they are often trained on the job, creating a significant burden on practice managers and incumbent PAs.

As the largest private employer in Massachusetts and a key health care provider, MGB is committed to enhancing the skill building and career advancement opportunities of its 82,000 employees. That commitment includes a 2020 [strategic partnership](#) with UMass to develop certificate and degree completion pathways for MGB employees.

The Practice Assistant Certificate is a UMass program targeting service and entry-level environmental and food service employees within MGB. The program helps professionalize the PA role and develop a pathway for entry-level employees to acquire credentials that advance their careers. Additionally, the Practice Assistant Certificate is stackable to an associate or bachelor's degree. The first cohort will consist of twenty to twenty-five working adults from the two hospitals.

“It was helpful to have guidance and support along the way as we built the first ever Practice Assistant Certificate program during a pandemic. The C-BEN team and workshops provided us with a focused opportunity to base the program on best practices and the accountability to keep moving on a forward-thinking concept during such a reactive time.”

– Kim McLaughlin, Director of Workforce Development, UMass Online

The Five Steps in Developing a World-Class CBE Program

Building a World-Class CBE Program: C-BEN's Five-Step Approach

C-BEN helps institutions and employers design and build programs through a step-by-step process with interactive work sessions, structured design activities with iterative feedback, and ongoing guidance.

UMass Online designated a core team to work on the pilot program and had buy-in and participation from the senior leadership team, with the system chancellor for academic programs and senior vice president of economic development providing academic oversight. The project team included representatives from MGB. When needed, MGB was able to engage specific staff from the hospitals, including human resource professionals and current and former PAs and PA managers.

The following section outlines the five-step development process C-BEN conducted with UMass Online and MGB.

Step 1: Understanding CBE and Defining the Occupational Competencies

Once grounded in the tenets of CBE, workshop participants focused on defining the appropriate competencies for the PA role. The employer had to describe in behavioral terms what each competency looks like when it is developing, developed, and highly developed in a workplace context. To achieve that, the employer identified the specific skills and behaviors they wished to see demonstrated via a card sort exercise. MGB representatives answered a set of structured questions on the PA role:

- Knowledge: What do I need to know?
- Skills and abilities: What do I need to be able to do?
- Intellectual behavior: What dispositions must I display?
- Application and transfer: Where must I be able to apply these knowledge, skills, and abilities and at what level?

The questions were critical because CBE emphasizes learning, not time- or credit-based education. Students master competencies derived from the skills tied to the real-life performance of the role. C-BEN's card sort exercise pinpointed five PA competencies:

1. Fundamental business skills and workplace behaviors
2. A cultural competency in effective customer service practices
3. Communication essentials
4. Fundamentals of information technology
5. Fundamentals of management

The Five Steps in Developing a World-Class CBE Program

Step 2: Developing Effective Assessment Strategies

C-BEN assisted the UMass core team in creating the assessment strategy and selecting the assessment approach for evaluating a student's proficiency in each competency. Assessment within CBE differs significantly from traditional educational assessments because it evaluates students' behaviors while they are performing the required tasks. Students work on the competencies one at a time, and the assessments evaluate their mastery of each competency in sequence.

Because assessment is critical for student progression, C-BEN helped UMass Online tailor the assessment methodology to each competency. For example, the Communication Essentials competency entails navigating challenging patient interactions. Therefore, students learn about conflict management approaches and tools and when and how to apply them, participating in activities to put their learning into practice. The assessments employ virtual simulations and role-playing to test how the student interacts with and defuses potentially problematic patients.

Step 3: Accelerating CBE Implementation

Developing any new academic offering in higher education requires forging stakeholder consensus. C-BEN's consulting team developed best practices for accelerating adoption of a CBE program. Those practices emphasize anticipating and surmounting specific institutional issues, from faculty governance to IT policies, and involving representatives from key campus units early on. The UMass team solicited and incorporated the views of campus units to boost the effectiveness of the training and support for the PA program.

One example of harnessing cross-campus partnership involved supporting the many students for whom English is not a first language. The core team worked with academic counselors, tutors, and the Writing Center to provide customized support throughout the teaching of the first competency, providing each student with the individualized assistance they needed. Those services included additional sessions with academic counselors, writing workshops, and a tutorial on PowerPoint, because the final assessment would need to be presented in that format.

The Five Steps in Developing a World-Class CBE Program

Step 4: Crafting the Learning Journey

A foundational component of CBE involves tailoring the learning experience to a student's educational attainment, experiences, and support needs. The UMass Online team and MGB developed student profiles and identified the necessary support services. The workshop commenced with UMass Online presenting a portrait of the student audience: who they are, what experiences they bring, how to enroll them, and the wraparound services they need.

Subsequently, C-BEN helped the UMass Online team translate the five PA competencies into a student learning journey. The UMass team used that journey to ensure the program content helps students master each competency. CBE underscores personalized learning journeys, so UMass Online conducted a prior learning assessment (PLA) with each enrolled student. A PLA assesses learning occurring outside of a traditional academic environment and provides a more comprehensive evaluation of the student's existing knowledge and abilities.

Step 5: Creating an End-to-End Student Journey

With initial instructional support from C-BEN, UMass developed an end-to-end student journey encompassing recruitment, course schedules, and student support services. The process is learner centric—aligning the Practice Assistant Certificate to the needs of a diverse cohort of working adults. The participants developed the enrollment plan (messaging, collateral, etc.) to attract MGB employees seeking career advancement.

Next, the team built the course schedule instruction to align with the students' work schedules. Creating the instructional content also involved designing the onboarding process and wraparound services. Employer participation is a cornerstone of CBE, including helping to shape the wraparound support. Accordingly, students receive life coaching from MGB staff and academic coaching from UMass advisors. Finally, the UMass team presented the student journey to the C-BEN team for feedback and finalization.



“This program has been helping me to empower myself and develop unique communication skills. I took some advice from the first class. It helped me personally to grow in the organization so much.”

– Practice Assistant Certificate Student

The Five Steps in Developing a World-Class CBE Program

Preparing for Launch

UMass gathered the key Practice Assistant Certificate stakeholders—the UMass Online core team, administration, and MGB representatives—to review the curriculum and launch plans. The workshop provided the program owners and advocates a pre-launch opportunity to refine plans and problem solve. The program's first cohort of 25 students started classes in April 2021.

The Practice Assistant Certificate Progress to Date

There is little disagreement that the United States requires more accessible and equitable pathways for people seeking success in the workplace. However, there are too many workers whose needs don't fit well with traditional time-based higher education credentials. The students enrolled in the Practice Assistant Certificate program represent the populations who need more flexible and applicable education opportunities: They're all working adults, a large majority are people of color, and more than half have a high school degree as their highest educational attainment.

The partnership among C-BEN, UMass Online, and MGB demonstrates how CBE ensures that credential holders possess the skills and knowledge required for in-demand occupations within the growing health care sector. C-BEN's approach to program development significantly increases graduates' job opportunities and economic mobility by having the institution and employer shape the curriculum and assessments of the required competencies. For UMass Online and other colleges and universities, CBE delivers personalized learning for students, closing the gaps between what each learner knows and what they need to get better-paid jobs.

As the first cohort works toward graduating in April 2022, the student quote above attests to how the Practice Assistant Certificate program is already empowering students to master skills that will help them thrive at work. CBE provides a learner-centric solution, focusing on what a person actually knows and can do so learners earn a credential that is more personalized, relevant, and valuable.

The Practice Assistant Certificate program exemplifies the power of CBE to create and launch a new-to-the-world credential that truly supports the goals of nontraditional students, health care providers, and higher education institutions. C-BEN's consulting team was pivotal in guiding the entire process, adhering to the Quality Framework throughout, and supporting client needs amidst a pandemic that directly affected the participating hospital system.

Partners Profiles and Participating Institutions

Partner Profiles



The Competency-Based Education Network (C-BEN) is a network of institutions, employers, and experts who believe competencies can unlock the future of learning—making postsecondary education and training more flexible, responsive, and valuable.

We support stakeholders across the spectrum of competency-based learning, from institutions and employers who want to embed competencies into their existing programs to those looking to design full competency-based degree programs from the ground up. Across all our work, our aim is to make education and training more flexible, responsive, and valuable.



Commonwealth Corporation is a quasi-public workforce development agency that strengthens the skills of Massachusetts youth and adults by investing in innovative partnerships with industry, education, and workforce organizations.

Our primary goals are to:

- Build regional industry training partnerships that prepare youth and unemployed workers for jobs in demand that lead to higher rates of employment;
- Upgrade the skills of underemployed workers to meet specific employer skill demands, leading to job retention, upgrades, and wage gains; and
- Increase the share of youth engaged in education and employment pathways, preparing them for postsecondary education and careers.

Participating Institutions



Holyoke Community College (HCC) trains incumbent workers from nonmedical occupations (e.g., environmental services, food service, and patient services) to become pharmacy technicians. HCC recruits three employee cohorts. This hybrid course includes face-to-face internships as well as online instruction.



UMass Online offers a competency-based online Practice Assistant Certificate program targeting service and entry-level environmental and food service employees from Mass General Brigham. The PA role is a crucial frontline allied health position providing outpatient and some in-patient services but lacks an academic pathway and credential. The certificate represents a key step in the role's professionalization.



Westfield State University (WSU) delivers competency-based addiction counselor education to fulfill the educational requirements for the certified alcohol and drug counselor tackling the opioid crisis in Massachusetts.

Visit www.cbenetwork.org to learn more about how C-BEN's consulting services help higher education institutions, state systems, and other organizations to build new or enhance existing CBE programs.



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