



Building a Talent Strong Texas through Competency-Based Education



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Creating a Talent Strong Texas through Competency-Based Education in Texas: A Brief on Opportunities for Scale

Over the past decade, Texas has been a pioneer in advancing competency-based education (CBE) for learning beyond high school and has created current policy conditions that can support the scale CBE in all sectors. Notably, there are well-established CBE programs at the technical college, community college, and university levels, with program offerings for every type of credential award from certificates, associates, and bachelor degrees, to graduate degrees. Efforts are furthered by state-level and cross institution collaborative efforts, foundation support of pilots, and measures within outcomes-based funding formulas that can yield increased funding for CBE outcomes. Overviews of these efforts were effectively described in [Competency-Based Education Programs in Texas: An Innovative Approach](#) a 2015 study by the RAND Corporation and [A Topography of Texas Competency-Based Education Today](#) by Judith Sobesta in 2016.

The [Competency-Based Education Network](#) (C-BEN) is a national organization committed to advancing high-quality CBE. As part of their efforts nationally, C-BEN has undertaken several efforts to support the expansion of postsecondary CBE in Texas with generous financial and intellectual support from the Greater Texas Foundation. There are two components to this work, C-BEN is: 1) supporting a cohort of institutions to develop and implement new programs, and 2) conducting research and developing a policy brief with recommendations to support expansion of CBE in Texas.

This brief offers suggestions for coordinated state level actions to advance CBE in Texas and produce quality outcomes for Texans and the Texas economy. The following findings are the result of qualitative interviews with state agency leaders, university system leaders, deans, and faculty involved with CBE programs and processes in Texas. Further document audits were conducted to examine historical documents, policies, trainings, workshops, and handbooks.

State of Competency-Based Education in Texas

The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) provides a vision for the State's education and workforce needs and goals in [Building a Talent Strong Texas](#). Competency-based education has a good starting position in Texas and can be part of the solution in addressing the demands for a skilled workforce. Moreover, policy opportunities enacted by the 88th Texas Legislature in 2023 provide incentives that reinforce the outcomes that existing CBE programs are demonstrating efficacy in producing. Yet it appears unlikely that the current context of CBE at the institutional and policy levels can yield expansion at the scale needed to meet state attainment and workforce goals unless there are concerted and coordinated efforts across agencies, systems, and institutions.

Despite exemplary progress and favorable policy conditions, there are some gaps to scaling CBE within Texas. As with elsewhere, **CBE programming is shoehorned into credit-hour based contexts; as a result, there are systemic disconnects that make expansion of competency-based education difficult for institutions who must essentially operate two business models- one credit-based and one mastery-based.** The following challenges provide Texas-specific examples and demonstrate the head winds nationally that face institutions as they try to scale new approaches within a well-established paradigm:

- **Lack of unified vision in advocating for CBE in Texas.** While many are supportive of advancing CBE in Texas, each stakeholder had different perspectives on the best course of action or how actions might fit in broader state goals.
- **Variance in understanding of how Texas policies impact CBE.** As with the need for a unified advocacy vision, there were different – and sometimes conflicting – perspectives in how policies supporting CBE are implemented.
- **No transparent statewide inventory of existing CBE programs.** No single person was able to share an inventory of what is currently being offered as CBE in Texas and at which institutions. Without an accurate catalog of CBE courses in Texas, it is difficult to understand the progress of scale and expansion of CBE.
- **Little evidence of interest in expansion beyond current strong Texas CBE institutions.** Conversations with people outside of the current institutions offering CBE were focused on seeing how things progressed, but could not articulate how they might proceed with replicating successful approaches at their institution.

Opportunities for Texans

Texas is starting from a position of strength to look at CBE as parts of the solution to meet state education and workforce goals. There is an opportunity to advance a robust agenda to strategically expand postsecondary competency-based education in Texas. Developing consistent and coordinated approaches can create broader understanding of incentives and barriers to CBE and help educate peer institutions, employers, community leaders, and policy makers. Texas specific opportunities include:

- **Create a cross-system leadership working group to establish statewide CBE priorities.** Clear, coordinated leadership for statewide CBE advocacy is not currently in place in Texas. To address this, it is recommended to empanel a cross-system leadership group to elevate key issues and to foster an environment that ensure

effective implementation of high-quality CBE across Texas. Ideally, this group would include representatives from – and strengthen collaboration between – THECB, universities, community colleges, and technical colleges on common issues of reporting, funding, and program development & approval.

- **Purposefully leverage favorable policy opportunities to grow enrollment and strategic expansion of CBE in Texas.** The State of Texas has created conditions that have allowed for the incubation of a broad range of effective CBE that spans a range of credentials. Several policies were enacted in the 88th legislature that have skills and outcomes orientation that either explicitly or implicitly favor CBE programming. Texas-based CBE programs should partner with THECB to ensure that implementation of these policies can fully support their programs. These policies include:
 - Ensure eligibility and participation in community college outcomes-based funding formula.
 - Support funding for the Texas Competency-Based Education Grant Program to ensure future implementation of the scholarship aligns with administration of CBE programs.
- **Create a Texas-focused communications campaign to expand understanding of CBE statewide.** Since misconceptions about competency-based education persist among faculty, administrators, and policymakers, developing common communications tools for Texas could assist with reducing active resistance to CBE. Content supporting demystifying CBE could include engagements and tools on data-informed improvements in student outcomes, demonstrating continued faculty roles, reinforcing commitments to quality, and articulation of how CBE programs support Texas policy goals.
- **Strengthen back office professional development to ensure consistent understanding of CBE data, definitions, reporting, and funding.** Fitting CBE into credit-based worlds is regularly cited as one of the major challenges to implementing mastery-based programming. Moreover, inconsistent perspectives on some administrative functions, creating professional development opportunities for registrars, data and institutional researchers, and finance staff could build capacity and strengthen implementation of CBE in Texas.
- **Advocate for modest, targeted funding support to incentivize the development of new CBE credentials.** Since CBE programming supports the goals of Building a Talent Strong Texas by offering teaching methodologies shown to support adult learners and have the ability to target high-need skill industries, creating opportunities to build out new programs that address those needs would be mutually beneficial for students, institutions, and the State of Texas. Explore which programs haven't been developed in a CBE context statewide and propose modest costs to support the build out of these programs at multiple institutions. Ideally, this would be done in concert with THECB and span multiple providers.

Next Steps

Texas leaders and key stakeholders in CBE should collaborate to review these recommendations and determine the best ways to proceed. Once priorities and collaborators have been established, it is suggested to meet to determine best organizational cadence and structure to continue strategic conversations.



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