

# Is There Any Difference between Competency-Based Education and Mastery-Based Learning?

November 6, 2014 by [Michelle Weise](#)

I smiled as a young research assistant asked me this because many higher education leaders who work on competency-based education (CBE) have been grappling with this same knotty question.

Because there is now [legislation](#) for a CBE demonstration project on Capitol Hill as well as a call for [experimental sites](#) in CBE by the Department of Education, it is becoming clear that from a movement perspective, the terms CBE and competencies are sticking. Nevertheless, there remains quite a bit of anxiety or fluidity around the distinctions between mastery, proficiency, fluency, and competence.

It's worth, therefore, taking some time to assert that CBE shines a much-needed light on specific and measurable student-learning outcomes in higher education.

Many of you are familiar with [Susan Patrick's](#) and [Chris Sturgis's](#) five-part [working definition](#) of high-quality CBE from 2011:

1. Students advance upon demonstrated mastery.
2. Competencies include explicit, measurable, transferable learning objectives that empower students.
3. Assessment is meaningful and a positive learning experience for students.
4. Students receive rapid, differentiated support based on their individual learning needs.
5. Learning outcomes emphasize competencies that include application and creation of knowledge along with the development of important skills and dispositions.

This particular definition was intended for a K–12 audience, but the core of competency-based learning arguably remains the same for the postsecondary world. Learning providers are aiming toward mastery learning. No CBE provider is out there, trying to shuffle students on to the next competency by setting the lowest bar possible. Rather, they are integrating formative tests just as Benjamin Bloom [described](#) in mastery learning, which are “given for feedback followed by corrective procedures and parallel formative tests to determine the extent to which the students have mastered the subject matter.”

However you define CBE, the intent is to be clear about a student's precise skillsets, dispositions, and capabilities in a way that seat-time-based learning is ill-equipped to reveal. A list of college credits and grades on a transcript or even a diploma more generally are poor proxies of what a student can *do*. Competencies, in contrast, offer a legible and meaningful reflection of what a student both knows and can do with that knowledge.

There is a fundamental core of CBE, and it's unlikely that your definition diverges radically from the essence of these tenets. That being said, however, people should be ready to witness a wild proliferation of different learning pathways that stem from these same core definitions. At [my think tank](#), for instance, we write about a very specific kind of online



version of CBE aligned to workforce needs in a book titled [Hire Education: Mastery, Modularization, and the Workforce Revolution](#).

There is already and will emerge many more varied manifestations as institutions join the growing cadre of colleges and universities turning to competency-based models. Recently, Purdue and University of Michigan joined University of Wisconsin to bring the count up to three major [public institutions](#) now developing new CBE pathways.

The University of Michigan's new [Masters of Health Professions Education](#) program (MHPE) is structured in a particularly noteworthy way. This is an *offline* distance-education program. There are no lectures. In fact, there is no campus-based instruction—no content provided by the university. Coached along by individual mentors, students of the MHPE program learn by “doing.”

In order to apply to the program, students must already have a terminal degree in a health profession such as medicine, nursing, dentistry, pharmacy, social work, public health, and so on. More importantly, they must also be practicing in a professional educator role.

By targeting *practicing* health professionals, this particular CBE program is taking an old concept and making it new. As novel as this program appears to be, it is relying heavily on the four principles of adult learning or [andragogy](#) that Malcolm Knowles introduced decades ago:

1. Adults need to be involved in the planning and evaluation of their instruction.
2. Experience (including mistakes) provides the basis for learning activities.
3. Adults are most interested in learning subjects that have immediate relevance to their job or personal life.
4. Adult learning is problem-centered rather than content-oriented.

Michigan's MHPE program is tailored to the professional practice of each student. Out of the [twelve program competencies](#), the students have great flexibility in sequencing and demonstrating competence through a set list of Education Professional Activities (EPAs). In other words, in order to demonstrate their mastery of certain competencies, students must tie their work experience to specific core competencies and activities.

Such an experience-based learning pathway centers on a very specific niche of adult learners and reveals the wild variation possible when scaffolding a new CBE program. It reminds us that even if you dislike the term competency, the core tenet of mastery can be underscored in a way that moves beyond the term itself.

Those still in the nascent stages of developing CBE programs, particularly members of the NGLC [Breakthrough Models Incubator](#), the CBE-Network ([CBEN](#)), as well as all of the [community colleges](#) collaborating with Western Governors University, can rest assured that there is a tremendous amount of latitude to be inventive and create structures that bring to the fore that CBE is foremost about mastery.

## About the Author

Dr. Michelle R. Weise is a senior research fellow in higher education at the Clayton Christensen Institute for Disruptive Innovation. Michelle's commentaries and research have been featured in a number of publications such as Harvard Business Review, The Economist, The Boston Globe, Inside HigherEd, The Chronicle of Higher Education, and USA Today. She is the co-author with Clayton M. Christensen of Hire Education: Mastery, Modularization, and the Workforce Revolution.