The Student Perspective on Competency-Based Education: Qualitative Research on Support, Skills, and Success

Key Findings From Qualitative Research:

1. **Flexibility is the hallmark benefit for CBE students.** Our focus group participants highly valued the ability to study when they wanted and progress at their own pace. Their responses suggest CBE programs deliver real benefits to students who have more challenging schedules or prefer a flexible learning environment.

2. **CBE students varied significantly in the pace they set for their programs.** Many moved faster through their programs than they expected, and several focus group participants were on pace to complete an associate’s degree faster than the two-year time frame. Other students moved more slowly to work around challenging life schedules. A minority of students struggled to make progress in the low-structure environment.

3. **CBE works best for self-motivated learners who prefer setting their own schedules, but is likely not the best fit for all students.** Our survey results showed that CBE students much more consistently preferred flexible schedules than traditional students. Participants emphasized that younger, less mature, or less motivated individuals could face challenges completing the program. CBE’s unique format will not work for every student.

4. **Some CBE institutions have created academic and social support programs to help students navigate the highly individualized learning environment.** Generally CBE students reported less need for face-to-face interaction than traditional students, although most wanted the ability to speak with an instructor or coach when they needed help. The best support programs offered a comprehensive mix of social and academic help.

5. **CBE students had a lot more confidence in their career preparation than traditional students, although the programs may struggle to teach certain “soft” skills.** A growing body of evidence suggests social skills like teamwork and networking are highly linked to career success. Since CBE students work at their own individual pace, it makes group projects more difficult. However, CBE seems well placed to teach job specific skills such as coding.

6. **CBE programs costs vary by type of program, pricing structure, and financial aid eligibility.** More quantitative research is needed to answer the question definitively, though some pricing models could cost students more.

7. **Students reported few people understood what CBE was, but it did not appear to be a barrier to program recruitment.** Participants found their way in through a variety of avenues and felt they could explain how it works to peers.
Policy Recommendations:

1. The Department of Education must get the CBE experimental sites off the ground. These will be essential in continuing development and improvement of this promising education model.

2. Provide clear, consumer-tested information about CBE to all prospective students. CBE likely works best for self-motivated learners focusing on job-specific skills, and students should understand that. Communicating about social and academic supports could also help programs recruit student skeptical of the unstructured environment.

3. Researchers and the Department of Education must further study student outcomes and financial aid delivery at CBE Programs. Assuming CBE programs deliver the career results expected, students should have the ability to use federal financial aid in the absence of credit hour rules.

4. Ensure that any platform or program used in CBE is technology-friendly, accessible, and optimized for mobile devices. Fulfilling the promise of flexible, individualized education will require full integration with smartphones and tablets.

5. Ensure comprehensive academic and social supports are available for CBE learners and tailored to their needs. Though many students in CBE prefer the flexible learning environment, academic and social supports are still critical for student success.